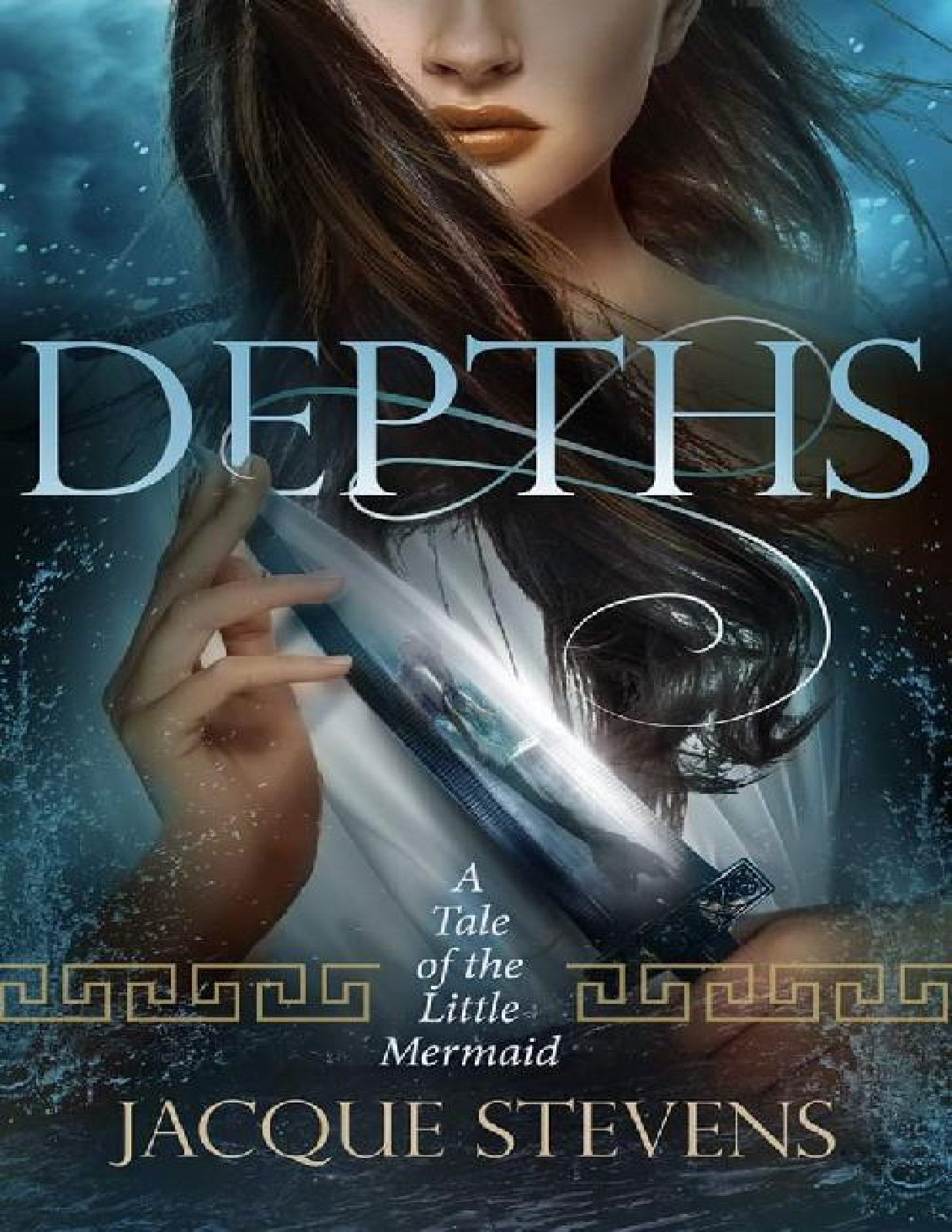
DEPTHS
A Tale of the Little Mermaid
JACQUE STEVENS

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A TALE OF THE LITTLE MERMAID (BOOK ONE)

JACQUE STEVENS

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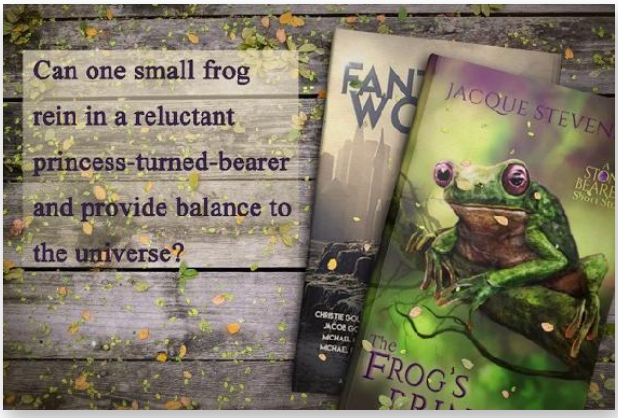

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CHAPTER 1

A man stood in my garden.

I looked back at the book of pictures on my lap, blinked, and looked up again. Usually, that was all it took to dispel illusions born of light hitting the nearby waves just right, allowing my idle mind to imagine for a moment that the figures in my storybook had come to life. Usually, the images faded long before they could open their mouths, telling me the rest of their stories or reassuring me that they would be thrilled to be the secret best friends I wished for. Usually.

But this man was still there. Blinking, rubbing my eyes, squinting sideways did nothing to dissuade him from existing.

A man stood in my garden, crushing my chickpea plant and pointing a spear in my face.

I sprang from the grass into a crouch over my book like a mother bird defending her nest. The spear leveled with my eyes. I stared, and the man stared right back, as if I were as foreign to him as he was to me. As if he had never seen a barefoot girl in a short tunic before.

The man lowered his spear. A cape hung over his leather tunic, but no crest I recognized. His tan skin seemed weathered, his beard held streaks of gray, but I hadn't seen enough men up close to guess his age. The broad lines of his shoulders and lump in his throat were as foreign to me as a storybook beast.

"Is this the isle of Lady Miranda?" His dark and coarse voice echoed through the wind whistling through the tall grass and stirring up the sand to scratch at my bare toes.

Keeping my eyes trained on the man, I straightened and backstepped onto a rock. His ship had moored in the distance, and other men stood yards behind him. Their sandals marred the once clear sand. Not secret best friends. Invaders. Everything Mother taught me to hate and fear.

My stare became a solemn accusation. “You’re a man.”

His curt nod seemed to question my sanity. “Yes.”

“Men aren’t allowed.”

The man smiled. “Men come frequently, I’m told. The problem comes when they try to leave.” He looked around the island as though he didn’t have a thing to fear.

I scanned the moving surf near the man’s ship. No break in the endless blue—no sign of my family, but that didn’t mean they weren’t close. “You should leave. Now, while you still can.”

Harsh laughter shook the man’s chest. “If anything, you should be asking for our protection. Next sign of civilization is leagues out. You’ll find us very accommodating, for a price.”

I didn’t have gold. I had nothing but my book and the clothes on my back, but I guessed the man knew this as his eyes wandered the length of my bare legs. He might think me naive, but if there was one thing Mother had taught me, it was the price men required.

It would serve him right if he got just what he wanted.

The man opened his mouth, but I missed his words in the crash of the waves and my own indecisive thoughts. “What?” I asked.

“I said, do you have a name?”

I nodded slowly, now decided. “Arianna, Princess of the Deep. You wish to see my mother?” No reason not to give him to her. He had ignored my previous warning, and his words proved he was the sort of monster my mother always said men were. I now only wanted him gone, and I certainly couldn’t get rid of him and the rest of his crew all by myself.

The man jerked, his eyes searching my long strands of walnut brown hair as if he expected scales or horns to appear. “Your mother? You’re a siren? But you look . . . human.”

I sighed. If he knew anything about my mother, he should know she was born a princess of Cypari—a perfect raven-haired beauty and perfectly human. The bond she made with the sea increased her magic, but it did not change the shape of her offspring. Not inherently. Not without making the bond ourselves.

“Do you want to see my mother or not?” She would find out in any case. He was a *man*.

The man hesitated. “Well, yes.”

“Then come. But the rest of your men will have to stay on the ship. Only one may see her at a time.” I said it like a long-established rule, though as far as I knew, he was the first to come this far without falling under my family’s song.

“And do you want me unarmed as well?” He shifted the spear in his hand.

I shrugged. When Mother was here, it wouldn’t make a bit of difference. I just wanted his men away from my garden and off my sand.

The man turned to wave his crew away. I kicked my book of pictures under the weeds. I had kept it hidden from my family for years and certainly wouldn’t show it to this man now.

Nor would I after Mother spilled his blood on the rocks.

I led the man toward the cliffs on the western side of the island. I could have called Mother anywhere, but something about the rocks seemed appropriate. They formed a narrow channel between my island and the rocky tail end of the greater peninsula of Solis. My family took men off ships from Solis all the time, but the ships kept coming. They tried to avoid us by straying too close to Charybdis’s whirlpools, dashing themselves on the cliffs.

Wood drifted onto this shore from countless shipwrecks. Sometimes bones.

I stood over the sea. “What was your name?” The stretched-out silence compelled me to ask, though I would rather he stay a stranger, a nameless beast, a *man*.

The man stood straighter. “Naman. Consul of Cypari.”

Cypari. It was my mother’s island—the one where she had been raised as a princess so long ago—but I was determined not to show my surprise. He still was a man. “Well, go on and call her, Naman. She always hears.”

The man’s jaw set; his shoulders squared. “Miranda, Lady of the Sea, I’ve come to parley with you.”

Silence. Naman shifted his feet through the dust. He turned, a restless query printed on his brow, but my eyes stayed on the skyline.

A thin cloud shrouded the rays of the sun. Shadows stretched over the rocks with the waning light. The breeze shifted. Water lapped, darkening the stone below us. White foam swirled into a funnel, the wind's whistle building to a moan as it pulled my hair across my face.

Mother. The weather, the tides, spoke more of her than the voice thundering over the waves.

"And what interest would that have to me?" The mist and ocean spray cleared. Mother appeared, her tail wrapped around a stone spire isolated in the channel.

I smiled as the man shook.

My mother still had raven hair—falling past her waist, water dripping from the sharp ends. Her figure was still young and perfect, though fins and a tail had replaced her legs. Her pale skin held tinges of gray or blue. Visible veins twisted in patterns like a spider's web across her skin, except where the dark tattoos of the God of the Deep stood for all to see. The dark marks were so numerous she almost seemed clothed—no more offensive than the naked skin of a dolphin or any other creature born to the waves.

Two of my sisters bobbed up their heads in the water below her, Titera and Navina. Both seemed younger versions of Mother, though Vi had a thicker frame and darker hair. They stared with closed frowns and hungry eyes—the feral stare of a gull watching a crab crawl along the sand.

Our visitor finally came to himself and went back to leaning on his spear. "Because we want the same thing. The death of the Sun Prince."

Mother laughed—a musical sound. "The prince is dead. If you know anything about me, then you must know this." The Prince of Solis had been her betrothed, her first kill. She had been human then and sacrificed his heart to the God of the Deep.

That was how she became a siren.

Taking hearts was how all of my family members became sirens.

The man dared shake his head. "That was many years ago, Your Greatness. Since then, war has wrecked the providences. A war your marriage with Solis was meant to prevent. A war we are losing. Their line continues, while we have been cursed with daughters."

My sisters glared, Vi licking her lips as if imagining his blood upon them.

Mother only smiled. “Not such a curse. I have six daughters, and each is a joy.”

“In this case, it has made the current succession uncertain,” the man said. “Just as before, the council’s only solution is a marriage alliance—our princess with the Sun Prince of Solis. Cypari has grown used to its independence. I will not have our country overrun by their kind.”

Mother flicked the tip of her tail. “That is a tragedy, but I’m bound to the water now, as you can see. If you wish the prince’s death, you must bring him to me.”

“That is what I wish to arrange.” He brought out some parchment wrapped in leather and tossed it near his feet. “The prince has spent the last two years as a foster of a conquered providence to the east. His father has called him home to wed and fulfill their contract with Cypari. He is to travel by boat in a fortnight. The route is written out for you, along with his description.”

“Very well. Pick it up, Ari.”

I crouched down and took the small bundle. I was curious enough to rip it open right then and there, but it wouldn’t have done me any good. None of our family knew how to read except Mother. We spoke or sang all of our lessons, as vellum or papyrus sheets were useless in the water. Even with my secret book, all I could do was look at the pictures and create the stories in my head.

“If that is all you wanted, I trust you can find your way back to your ship on your own?” Mother’s finger tapped against her shoulder. “We are unused to being overrun by your kind and will not bear the insult for long.”

The man hit his chest, a salute that was common in all the providences, then turned around. I watched him wind through the rocks and tall grass until he rounded a bend, out of sight.

“You let him go.” Vi slashed her tongue on the words, surely nicking it on her pointed canines and tasting her own blood instead of the man she craved.

Two more of my sisters thrust their heads from the waves—Catra and Corva, twins who always traveled together. Corva shook back her hair until enough water fell away to free her voice. “I don’t know why you care. We were watching the boat, and none of them were all that cute.”

“All large and hairy. It would only make your stomach churn.” Catra heaved her torso in mock duress.

Vi didn’t blink. “They are men. They trespassed. They should die.”

Both of the twins twittered with laughter. Corva mimed a great yawn. “You make it sound like such a chore.”

Mother held up her hand and my sisters fell silent. “Regardless, none of them would have made it here if I didn’t allow it. He is Cypari, so I let him come and let him leave. For now. He interests me. It has happened before, but it is rather rare.”

My sisters exchanged dark looks, but none dared speak until the water rippled and the last of my sisters surfaced. “They’ve gone,” Serena said in way of greeting. Her skin held tinges of green instead of blue, and her hair came in a lighter shade than all my sisters. Her father was a pale-skinned sailor from the north. “I watched their ship leave.”

My family must have been watching the whole thing from the beginning. I wanted to be outraged that they had all been better prepared than me, but that was nothing new. As the only one yet to make the change, I was the last to learn any piece of news.

“How do you plan to do it, Mother?” Titera asked, her eyes cool and calculating. “A prince will not be traveling alone.”

Mother focused on me, as I still stood near the cliffs. My weight shifted, and my toes sank deeper into the sand. “Many have let their guard down among us in the past,” she said. “Besides, Ari is still human. She is fifteen. This will be her task.”

My heart skipped in my chest. Me? A prince?

Titera’s frown deepened. “Is it . . . wise to trust Ari with this?” Without Mother here, she would have sworn. I knew exactly what my eldest sisters thought of my abilities—even Serena had a cynical expression. I would have hated them for it if I did not have my own doubts.

I had never killed a man before. I had seen my family do it, but they had powers I did not.

Powers I would not have until I found some way to kill a man without them.

The thought of waking one day and hearing my mother declare me old enough to take the heart of a fishmonger had filled my nights with dread. Now I was supposed to take a prince’s heart?

Mother bristled. “I don’t know what you girls think, but guards or not, a prince is just a man and will die like any other. If you cannot support your sister, then you may go about your own tasks.”

My sisters dove beneath the waves, one by one. I wished a curtain of water would hide me too, but I couldn’t speak to the elements as well as my mother, even when she was human.

Mother said calling to the elements was like an inner shout, when something inside you had to be communicated and done that there were no words for. Your soul called, beckoned, lured, bled out your heart’s desire and the storm answered as surely as a lusting sailor.

I had called to the clouds and waves several times before, but they never answered. Perhaps I never wanted anything important enough for the elements to care.

“Come here, Ari,” Mother said. “Let us see where you will meet your prince.”

I walked down the cliff to a lower shore. Mother leapt from the rock spire and swam toward me. Her back straightened as she neared the coast, her fins splitting into legs in a fluid movement. Her skin lost some of its blue, reverting to soft caramel decorated with ink-black marks. She stood and walked the last few feet through the rocks and sand. Soon the parchment was in her outstretched hand. I rolled the frayed edges of my tunic as her gray eyes darted over the page.

Mother nodded. “Yes, I see several parts of his route here that intersect the cliffs. This should work out quite well.”

“Are you certain it should be me?” The words burst out as I gripped my hem tighter. “Titera has the most experience. Vi can shake a mountain with her voice . . .” I might have listed every one of my sisters’ talents down through Serena and the twins, but my mother’s tired frown stopped me.

“I know what your sisters can do,” she said, cross with impatience. “I trained them. Their fathers were sea captains and brutes. Being forceful comes easily to them. But your father was talented as well, not to mention your mother. You have all you need and more.”

My hands went still. “My father wasn’t a sailor?”

“No.” My mother’s laugh took a lighter pitch, giggling like a bubbling brook. “The man was so seasick he stumbled off the ship nearly on his own. But he was talented, for a human. A poet and a singer. Haven’t I mentioned it?”

I shook my head. Mother hardly ever talked about our fathers except to curse them. She killed them long before her stomach swelled with child,

threw each of their withered carcasses to the waves the moment the light faded from their eyes, same as any other man.

“I let him entertain me for quite a while.” Her eyes glazed over, lost in her own vision. “He pleased me so much, I considered leaving him alive, but he was a man and betrayed me like the rest. When you were born, you were so weak Titera wanted to have you sacrificed like a male child, but I wouldn’t allow it. And that is why I think you should be the one to take the Sun Prince.”

I waited. Nothing had inspired my confidence yet.

Mother brimmed with impatience. “Don’t you see? This is your chance to prove to all of them that you belong with us. You will have sacrificed the heart of a Sun Prince, just as I have, and none of them will be able to doubt you again.”

CHAPTER 2

Mother wanted me to fast and meditate to get myself ready to meet the God of the Deep with my offering. I went back to my garden and positioned myself as the most dedicated of petitioners, facing the dark caverns of the shrine and altar Mother built, but images of princes danced in front of my eyes. Princes sitting on thrones, taking wives, winning chariot races, slaying serpents. They had always been featured heavily in the vellum pages of my secret storybook, and now I could see nothing else.

Broad-chested, hulking princes.

Mother always said her prince was the same, that when she met him in his armor and laurels, it seemed her nursemaids' stories had come to life. A reward for her life of piety—taking on the strict morals of a single, jealous god who forbade her to use her natural gift over the elements. Morals insisted upon to be fit to be a bride for Solis and the greater peninsula.

Morals she found the prince did not keep himself. She caught him lying with her handmaiden the same night she and her escorts reached his city.

He broke his word, so she broke hers, calling a hailstorm and stabbing him with shards of ice. She placed his heart on the altar she built to one of the old gods. Like the wind and water, the God of the Deep heard her cry and granted her even more power. She became a siren, punished men for their infinite crimes, and cursed her old nursemaids for spinning tales of princes.

If she had known about my book, it would have been destroyed years ago.

But Mother hadn't visited my garden in years. She did what she had to, raising my elder sisters, but as they grew old enough to watch their younger

siblings—as they grew old enough to take their own hearts, and we grew old enough to watch ourselves—the less she came.

I spent the last three of my fifteen years—the years after the twins left together—mostly alone. The sun rose and set in an endless cycle, but I always knew this day would come. Just as my curves formed or my hair lengthened, I would be expected to take this final step from girl to woman.

To siren.

I flipped another page of my storybook. The images blurred in my eyes until all I saw were tails instead of feet. Water instead of grass. I considered my family to be beautiful, but I couldn't picture it on myself. Instead of the mighty conqueror of men and magic my mother was, I would be overcome by the sting of the salt, the force of the waves.

I tossed the book aside, too restless to remain seated. I walked, but I didn't pay attention to where my feet went. I already knew every piece of the island. My frequent explorations as a young child were the only reason I had found my secret book in the first place. I loved to run barefoot in the grass, I loved to dance to the music of the birds, and I loved the glorious sun.

To join my family, I would have to leave it all behind. Still, I remembered a time when I was young, before my sisters had changed. The games we would play. The joy of holding each other close. I went from living in a happy bunch to having nothing but my garden.

Did I really want to stay this way, forever alone?

One of my favorite images in my book showed a pair of princes—one light, one dark, but equally strong. A woman stood in the center. Though breathtakingly beautiful and desired by both men, she was shown alone in the next page. Chin raised. Wind in her hair. Embracing her own power and spurring them both.

I wanted so badly to be the same majestic figure, the same unshakeable force my mother and all my sisters became, but I knew I wasn't.

My feet led me to the shallows, an open-crested lagoon my sisters often used to sun themselves. Movement caught my eye. I ran forward.

Perhaps one of my sisters would provide a distraction.

A shadowed silhouette crouched behind some rocks where the water reached the shore. Disappointment came over me as the shadows fled and the figure grew in size.

Serena was wrapped around her most current victim. Blood stained his neck and her fangs, but it wasn't the blood they craved, my sisters often explained. Once they had the man in their thrall, once they made the first cut, they fed on the blood only to drain the man's essence—his soul. And it was better, richer, if the man was at ease while they drained it.

So my sister sang, running her fingers over his chest. Her words promised more pleasure by her hands if he would only relax, submitting his will to hers. The man went limp in her grasp, a vague smile on his face as he gave in to her spell and allowed my sister to continue her feast.

I stood there torn. I didn't want to see this, but I didn't want to be alone either. His skin would wither; his heart would still. My sister would feed and leave his mangled corpse to the waves, allowing other creatures to feed. The thought churned my stomach.

The prince's corpse wouldn't be drained—it would have to settle for whatever common form of murder I could muster—but it would also be thrown to the waves after I took the heart.

Assuming I could ever manage to kill a man myself.

Serena looked up and grasped at her chest. "Ari, you gave me a fright. You could have made some more noise coming up."

"Sorry."

She shrugged, pushing her man away, leaving him sprawled in the shallow water and dampened sand. "I was almost done anyway."

"Where did he come from?"

The thin man only had a small cloth wrapped around his waist. Dark hair covered his back, but it didn't hide the bruises on his pale skin. He stared out with dull eyes, lying completely still.

Serena shrugged again. "Missed the ship."

I shook my head. There was no reason to lie to me. "Before or after you called to him?"

"After." A small drop of blood pooled in the crease of her smile. "Mother said to leave them be, but he's just a deckhand, so I doubt anyone will notice. I don't mind sharing with you though, if you want."

I winced. My stomach already felt sick. I was not a sea creature hungry for his corpse. Not yet anyway. "You know it isn't allowed. Mother says that I have to fast. I can't even eat fish."

"Oh, yes, to feast on the blood of the Sun Prince."

Water splashed. Serena's man staggered to his hands and feet, stumbling a few steps away in a half-crawl. Blood stained his hand as he held the fresh wound on his neck.

No longer smiling, fear and horror overtook his thinly bearded face.

Serena frowned, but didn't move. Really, where could he run to?

"Oops," she said. "See what happens when you distract me? What did you need then?"

"I just was thinking . . . I was worried . . ." I wanted to guard my words, but this was Serena. If any member of my family would understand, she would. "What if the prince won't come to me?"

"What are you talking about? They always come." Serena sang a few notes. Her man's dark eyes turned vacant again, and he lunged in her direction, slipping in the shallows.

"Yes, but I don't have the gift yet." And with my failure to call for the elements, it seemed unlikely I would ever have it.

"The handmaid in Mother's story had no gift either. No power at all but her looks." Serena ran her hands down her full figure and repositioned herself over her man with a flap of her tail. "Trust me, you have everything you need."

"But, I was thinking . . ." I sat with my knees together to tell her my new fear in a rush. "No man has ever contacted us before. Perhaps it is a plan to lure us out. Perhaps they found a way to stand against us. Just because he said he was Cypari doesn't mean we can trust him."

Serena laughed. "Listen to yourself. I don't trust him either, but if they had found a way to fight us, why wouldn't they have used it here? Especially before I took one of his men?"

"But what if—"

"Ari," Serena cut through the rest of my excuses and fears with a sigh, "don't you want to make the change?" She leaned away from her man into deeper water, honey curls fanning her head like a fallen cherub. "We would have so much fun together. Just like old times, but more. You don't know what it is like, to be one with the sea. The freedom, the excitement." Perfect bliss touched her bloodstained lips.

"I want to be with you. It is just . . . what if I can't?"

"We'll all be with you. The final kill will be your own, and we won't rob you of it, but we'll help with everything else. Then you will join the sea and be one of us forever."

I fell silent. The final kill was what worried me. Even if I got my prince as weak and helpless as my sisters preferred when they fed, could I take the heart?

Another splash. Serena still faced my direction, but her eyes narrowed as her man found his feet and stumbled through the surf again behind her.

“Serena . . .” I stopped, unable to continue. I knew that look. The first time I had seen it, Titera had made the change. She showed us how she fished without a rod or bait, staring into the shallows. A fish swam near, and her eyes turned lustful with something greater than hunger. Then she struck.

The crunch of the bone beneath her fingers still haunted my thoughts.

After watching Titera fish, I never joined in again. I told them I preferred vegetables from my garden. It wasn’t true though. I ate fish. I just didn’t want to hear that sound again.

Serena had that same look now. Just because they preferred their men alive and smiling, did not mean they would not snap necks and take whatever remained if their patience waned.

“Serena, could you . . .” I tried again. I wanted to ask her to wait to kill him until I left, but I couldn’t admit to the weakness. She wouldn’t scold like Titera, scowl like Vi, or laugh like the twins, but her eyes would fill with pity. Somehow that seemed worse.

She waited for me to finish, but before I found the words that would halt my sister and retain my dignity, the man’s shadow played over the water.

He stood, and our gazes held for an instant. A challenge? A plea?

I didn’t know what it was, but the depths of his emotions held me spellbound. He might not have the majesty of my storybook characters, but he seemed more sympathetic than Naman. More than a fish. I didn’t want to see his bones crack. I still couldn’t voice all that I wanted, but perhaps, if I just stayed silent and held Serena’s attention while he ran, I wouldn’t have to.

I could let him live one more hour, one more day in the sun.

As I pursed my lips together, wavering, the man nodded like we already reached an accord. He pulled a knife I didn’t know he had, raised and ready to hit Serena.

At once, everything slowed. I heard every soft lap of the water against his ankles, the wind breaking around his wrist. Light glittered on the blade, gliding closer.

Horror drained the blood from my face, rushing into my fingers and toes, but I couldn’t move. I opened my mouth but couldn’t speak.

Serena turned to follow my gaze. Then everything happened at once.

“Beast!” Her shriek reached a painful register.

The man dropped the knife, covering his ears. Blood seeped around his fingers.

My sister struck him with such force, they both tumbled under the surf. *Splash.*

Their wake rushed over my feet. I actually got my wish. His death blow happened beneath the waves. I never saw or heard it. A trail of scarlet trickled to the surface, but soon faded to white foam and dark waves.

An eerie stillness blanketed the shore, leaving only a small light still glittering near the surface. It was the light of the sun reflecting off a blade. Retrieving the dead man’s knife from the shallows, I realized how close I had come to betraying everything, betraying one of my sisters to a murderous man.

I had been thinking about my mother’s command the wrong way. The man I had been asked to kill wasn’t a snared fish or a character from my storybook. He was the Sun Prince. The villain of my mother’s story brought back to life. He was a beast like Naman, like all men.

Killing him would be an act of justice, striking out before he could prey on a woman unable to access our gift. Though I might still dread the moment, there was no other path forward. I might never achieve the full power and confidence of a storybook heroine, but I would no longer hesitate. Stumbling and groaning, I would still reach upward toward my goal. I would use the knife and strike. The horror would be gone in a second, quickly replaced by the freedom of the sea and the thrill of rejoining my family. Their strength would cover any of my remaining weaknesses, and I would never be alone again.

At least that is what I hoped.

CHAPTER 3

Days—a fortnight—passed in an instant. The time spun and whirled around me, and then, so did the waves. My sisters towed me through the sea to meet my prince, one of the twins holding each of my arms. My stomach churned, but the days of fasting, drinking only a mixture of water and honeyed wine Mother said was pleasing to the gods, left it mostly empty.

Even when the twins stopped in the shallows of the designated island cove, my feet slipped under me. Sputtering water from my mouth, I tried to stand. My arms ached, and salt blinded my stinging eyes.

"You should help her," Corva said.

"I helped her last time," Catra said. "You go."

The two scuffled until one grabbed me about the waist and dragged me the rest of the way to the dry land. I buried my hands in the sand and blinked until my vision returned.

"Thank you, Catra."

The tattooed girl fled across the beach on tiptoes. She dove into the water, and her tan legs melted together to reform her tail. She heaved a sigh, fanning out her gray-blue fins behind her.

"It's as if I've gone blind. How do you stand it?" When they weren't connected to the water, my family of sirens were almost as human as they were before, except now they knew how hopeless they were.

"Well, I haven't made the change yet, have I?" I wiped more water from my face. "Why do I have to be here? I can't call the prince." The knife I had taken from the dead man hung belted behind my back, hidden by the sopping bulges of my tunic, but nothing compared to the powers of a siren.

They should have no trouble capturing the prince themselves and bringing him to our island.

Corva shrugged, bouncing her shoulders. “Yes, but don’t you want to watch? Savor it? Our change happened far too quickly. We didn’t get to play at all.”

I remembered. We had been woken in the dead of night. Mother and my elder sisters led two entranced sailors onto our island. They had the men kneel next to the twins, two daggers flashed in unison, and that was it. No long buildup. No question of worthiness.

They were so lucky.

White sails rippled beside the clouds, catching my gaze. A ship moored in a narrow cove. On the opposite shore, hairy and foul men hefted barrels and large trunks over the rocks and sand toward the ship—men so similar to Naman’s crew they could have been the same men, though I had no way of knowing.

Maybe all men looked exactly the same.

Their grunts mingled with the sound of gulls as I inspected each man in turn, from the larger ones working to a smaller one fishing on the other end of the cove.

“Which one do you think it is?” I asked.

My sisters shaded their eyes. “That one?” Corva pointed to a pretty, almost feminine-looking man with a slick mustache. He yelled out instructions to the others, carrying a long scroll.

Catra stuck her arm out. “Or perhaps that one? Doesn’t he just look the part?” This one had a large stomach and hair covering almost every inch of his bare chest. My sisters laughed, but I scrunched my nose like I already smelled the sweat dripping off his back.

“Not that one.” He would have to be a monster, but I hoped he wasn’t ugly.

My sisters laughed harder.

Mother surfaced beside the twins. Her wet hair cascaded over her torso. “Are you ready, girls? They’ve already started to pack.”

“Which one is the prince?” Catra flipped her tail at the far shore.

Mother narrowed her gray eyes and pointed behind the twins. “That one. You see, Ari? You have nothing to worry about. Now come along, girls.”

They dove.

I stared.

The prince sat on rocks shaded by the tall grass, so I had barely noticed him before. Even now, I scarcely believed it. Instead of the broad-shouldered men of my storybook, the curly-headed prince seemed skinnier than me and hardly any older with just the soft hint of a beard coming in. He sat on the edge of the water in a tunic only slightly better than the other men, fishing with a long pole.

His scowl told me he hadn't had much luck.

Perhaps I could handle this. He didn't seem that tough at all!

I had to get a closer look. I held onto the rocks, slipping through the shallows. I willed myself to be as silent as a shade until I reached the shadow of a larger boulder. Crouching down, I paused to listen. A voice echoed through the cove as another figure sat near the prince. The blurred colors of their reflections swirled in the water beside me.

"Nothing is happening." The prince's voice jumped in pitch, uncertain where to land.

"Patience." This voice was just as coarse as Naman. Did all grown men sound like that when they weren't screaming out their death throes? "Did you expect a fish to come leaping into your net?"

"No, but I would like to know what I'm doing wrong. The people of Cypari are said to be expert fishers, and I am to be their prince." The long line of the pole's shadow tensed as the prince shifted his grip.

The older man laughed. "The Cypari *peasants* fish, and many of them starve."

"And I must be the one who feeds them."

"I think they would be happy enough if your father stops scaring the fish with your warships. You don't have to impress anyone."

The prince sighed. "Then why did you agree to teach me?"

"To keep you from getting in the way of the crew . . ."

The pole's shadow jerked forward. "I got something." The prince laughed. The light sound seemed more from shock than triumph. Silence filled the cove, thick with tension.

A sloppy *plop* told of the fish's arrival on the shore.

I tensed, waiting for the snap.

Water splashed out. A gray-scaled fish darted past my submerged arm toward freedom.

"You let it go?" the older man asked.

“It was small anyway,” the prince said.

I released a long breath. He had let the fish go, and I hated him for it.

His small size had seemed a relief before, but coupled with his speech and actions, it had become too much to bear. He was to be a beast. He was certain to be a beast. Why couldn’t he just *act* like a beast long enough for me to strike?

My family’s voices echoed through the cliffs. My time was coming. I buried my head into my arms. All the men would be ensnared, and I—

“The sailors are nervous,” said the older man. “Your Highness, you should replace your ear wax.”

The prince scoffed. “Silly superstitious . . .”

“Coming through these parts, all the sailors are. We only have to humor them for another day.”

“As you wish.” A heavy sigh followed his dragging footsteps.

I slipped backward until I risked lifting my head over a rock. The prince and the sailors had beeswax in their ears and gathered their things in profound silence. Slowly, like they had all the time in the world. Completely ignoring the song of the sirens.

That couldn’t be right. Were sailors often prepared for possible siren attacks with wax like this? I hadn’t been present at enough of my family’s hunts to know. I slipped back through the rocks and shallows to my original spot on the opposite shore, waiting for my family to resurface and explain what would happen next.

They sprung out of the water one at a time like flowers in my garden.

Vi shook her wet hair with venom. Water sprayed against my arm. “They planned this,” she said. “They blocked out our voices and are waiting for us to meet them on the shore with their blades. I knew we shouldn’t have trusted that man.” Her dark eyes narrowed into slits.

It seemed strange for Vi and me to agree on anything, but even without seeing the beeswax, I feared that might be the case. We never should have trusted Naman or any man.

If the prince couldn’t be spelled and called to the water, the whole venture might be doomed to failure. My family could never fight a whole group of men on the shore.

Mother glided forward through the water with unruffled calm. “We have dealt with this before. No need to worry. They can’t stay here forever, so we

will simply wait until they set sail again. They will have no power against us on the open sea, even if they can't hear us."

"You want us to take the ship by force?" Titera asked. "But how can we be certain that the prince won't be killed before we can bring him to Ari? She's not strong enough to stand with us during the attack."

She was right. I was useless in open water. A dead weight. I waited for them to call the whole thing off; I would pretend to be disappointed. I wouldn't change tonight after all. We could put it off for weeks—perhaps even months until Mother tracked me down a common fishmonger.

Mother shook her head. "Ari has other talents."

Vi peered up at me. "Like what?"

The silence hung in the air as a great shroud. My cheeks burned.

Mother clicked her tongue. "Come now, girls, you must know something. This is your sister." The fact that Mother had not offered her own suggestion was not lost on me.

Serena tried. "Well, she . . . She always . . ."

"She can drown." Catra bobbed in the water with mirth.

Corva laughed. "She said *talents*, Catra."

"Well, none of the rest of us can do it."

"Are you quite certain?" Corva tackled her twin. Their sudden wake spread across the shore, darkening the sand and covering my finless feet.

A smile crossed Mother's face. "Yes. She can drown."

CHAPTER 4

I kicked through the open water as hard as I could, wet hair weighing down my head. Sharp waves fled from me, but nothing happened. The ship, now fully loaded and sailing through the great sea, seemed empty, the deck several paces above my head. It would sail on without me, all the way back to Solis. I would never see the Sun Prince again.

If only I could be so fortunate.

Serena's honey-colored hair split through the surf. Her green-tinged skin melted into the water, but her tattoos outlined her elegant dance through the waves. "Any luck?"

I spit water until I found my voice. "I don't think they can see me."

"Keep splashing. This will work." Serena seemed so certain. So had my mother. I silently cursed them both. The men were monsters, but my family still expected me to believe that the prince's crew would see me struggling in the water and be curious or charitable enough to pull me into their ship?

Serena dove back down, a great flap of her tail throwing another spray of salt water over me. Great. What if I really did drown? Would my sisters save me or laugh?

This was such a bad idea, but the cliffs of my island were visible through the waves. Maybe I could swim to it—or I could if I stopped wasting my energy treading water. I kicked and hit wood. Pain shot through my leg and water funneled around me. The current, the wake around the ship, pulled me in a sudden torrent. I fought to pull my head over the surf, gagging on salt.

My head broke through the waves. "Ser-Serena!"

Thick cords struck my head. I thrashed as a net hoisted me upward. A sudden thump spilled me across the deck. I blinked, my eyes stinging, my heart racing.

A pack of men leered down at me. Large, hairy, ghastly men. “It’s a girl.”

I stretched out my tunic, wishing I was wearing something longer even if its weight would have dragged me deeper into the sea. I had gotten on the ship, but I still cursed my mother’s plan.

The men would violate and kill me long before I found the prince and my sisters came.

One of the men glanced over the hull, scanning the waves. “Where did she come from? We’re in the middle of the sea.”

“We should throw her back in,” another man added. “There has to be some witchery involved, and it’s bad luck to have a woman aboard.”

The men crowded around me. Closer and closer. A mass of unruly beards and hungry brown eyes. Sweat and salt assaulted my nose. I still had the knife belted to my back, but the sound of their footsteps set me trembling, unable to reach it.

And what was one small knife against so many? Pulling it out might only anger them more.

I pressed myself against a wooden wall and stumbled when the cabin door opened.

The prince walked out, his smaller frame and softer features almost familiar. A strange part of me wanted to cling to him like I ran to Serena as a child. My eyes fixed themselves on him as he surveyed all the men on the deck. “What’s going on?” he asked.

The gruff men never answered him.

“I’ll get rid of her.” The large spokesman seized my arm, dragging me toward the side. He was going to throw me overboard, but I was almost glad. I might not be able to keep an eye on the prince like Mother had wanted, but I would be safe.

I could swim back to my island alone. I could swim a whole lot farther than that, if needed.

“What are you doing?” the prince asked again, more panic entering his higher-pitched voice. He pushed past a tangle of arms and legs to reach me. “You’re scaring her.”

Another man dressed in full armor came through the cabin door, putting his shoulder between me and the prince. “Your Highness, perhaps it would be better if you waited below deck.”

The prince ducked under the armored man’s arm. “She’s just a young girl! They can’t throw her off.”

The sailor holding me stopped walking, but he gripped my arm tighter. Pain radiated from where his thumb pressed into my skin. “We can’t keep her out here, either,” he said. “What if she’s a sea witch?”

“Lock her in one of the storage rooms then.”

I turned toward the new voice, but the older man standing by the prince wasn’t a stranger.

Naman. He was here. I hadn’t been able to tell before, only seeing his broken reflection and hearing his voice, but he was the man who had fished with the prince earlier. Now he wore the prince’s colors—the sun crest of Solis. What was going on?

“I’ll take her.” Naman wrestled my arm from the other man, his touch no lighter than the sailor before him. My whole arm would be covered in bruises before the night was over.

The prince still looked uncertain. “You’re going to lock her up?”

“A compromise, Your Highness. The men will feel better, and we can let her go when we reach Solis. She will be in much better condition than when we found her.”

The prince hesitated for another moment before dropping his hands. “All right.” He took one step back. “But you’ll make certain no one hurts her? Get her something to eat?”

My stomach groaned at the words, still empty by my mother’s decree.

Why would a prince or any man care about something like that? I had only looked to him as a panicked reflex; I never expected him to help. I never expected for him to speak on my behalf in ways my sisters hadn’t since becoming sirens. As sirens, my family didn’t have a lot of patience for human weakness, though I was certain they still loved me.

And would love me more once I became one of them.

“Of course, Your Highness.” Naman bowed his head and pulled me through the darkened doorway—stairway. My foot skidded over the sudden edge of the first step, and I nearly tumbled the rest of the way. Empty hammocks swung from posts, lining the walls with moving shadows.

Fingers digging into my wrist, Naman dragged me through a dim maze of crates and coiled rope until I found my voice. “You aren’t from Cypari,” I said. “You want your own prince killed.”

“Quiet.” He yanked me harder, and I tripped on the uneven wooden planks.

“You lied to my mother. Everyone should hear.”

He pulled me around, pinning my arms against the hull. This oversized man was certainly a beast—violent and spitting as he yelled in my face. “Do you think your mother would care? She wants the prince killed and so do I. What else matters?”

I frowned. He was right. Mother wouldn’t care. She might kill Naman for his lies—she would kill every man on this ship—but she would still want the prince dead, and she would still want me to do it. Nothing had changed.

But somehow it had. My frown became a dark scowl, and I refused to cower under his grip. I hated this man. He lied to get the murder he wanted and likely had other unsavory goals still hidden. He was the monster of my mother’s stories—a man I could strike down and watch his life blood trail through the sea. I could be a vengeful handmaiden of the depths if this were my target. But could I really kill a boy who released that fish and wanted me cared for, just because this man wanted the prince’s death? Even if the prince was also a monster?

“What are you even doing here?” Naman asked. “I sailed to your island from Solis, on our way to collect the prince from his fostering, and marked all the places we planned to make berth returning here. You were supposed to call the prince away. That was our deal.”

“You also told the prince to cover his ears when we tried.”

“I couldn’t very well make it look like I *wanted* my prince to be taken, with the sailors already making a fuss. Whatever happens tonight, I can’t be named in this. Better to die by your hands than to be found as a traitor. I trusted you to find a way around that.”

We had “found a way around that,” and he would get his wish. No one would know about his sabotage except for me. Naman would die by our hands. They all would.

“You better be worth all the trouble.” Naman shoved me in a closet and slammed the door.

The darkness of the room fell over me. The door didn’t seem to have a lock or even a proper handle, but the scrape and thump of wood marked the formation of a tight barricade.

His footsteps retreated. I paced, weighing my options. There weren’t many.

I pulled my knife out then put it away again. It couldn’t help me now. I had already been blocked into this conflict, my family on one side, Naman on the other. They all wanted the prince killed, and they wanted me to do it. Three steps brought me to the far end of the closet.

The ship rocked. I toppled flat against the wall again as a shrill song filled the air.

No time left. My sisters were here, calling in a storm.

I had to get out of here and find the prince. To kill him or save him, I wasn’t certain, but I couldn’t stay.

I tried the door. It gave under pressure. Either the rocking vessel dislodged the barrier or Naman hadn’t done that good of a job to begin with. Was he still hoping I would kill the prince for him? It didn’t matter. I darted out of the closet. My feet skidded, the floor wet and tilting.

Water filled the hull.

I fell to my knees, reaching out to catch my fall. I held onto an empty hammock and tugged myself upward. Before I did anything, I needed to be free of this cabin. The stairs were only a few steps away. I put one foot forward but fell once I had to let go of the hammock. My hand hit the steps. I dragged myself upward, but my foot caught in a rope. The ship rocked.

A barrel skidded into the wall with another loud crash.

What if one of them hit me? I needed to get out. I grabbed my knife and sawed into the rope. It frayed, but so slowly. The storm my family created would kill us all.

I looked back at the door, wondering how fast I could get outside once I was free.

The next jolt pushed me through the opening faster than I wanted, breaking the last few strands of the rope and hurling me into a somersault. Rain poured down on my head. I put my knife away and looked into the storm. A flash of lightning blazed across the sky.

Men scattered across the deck, fighting at various ropes and pulls. Everyone yelled, but no one heard—either due to the wax they wore in their ears or sounds of the storm. Some of the men seemed to be doing nothing

but slipping around in circles. I couldn’t make out their faces, but I knew I would be safer in the water than with them.

I ran to the edge of the ship, rain and wind whizzing past.

“Girl?”

I turned. The prince was among the other men on the opposite side of the deck, pulling at a small lifeboat. Easily recognizable due to his smaller size. I didn’t see Naman, or at least I didn’t recognize his dark shadow among the others.

The prince stepped toward me and gestured with his hands—his words broken and muted through the storm. “You’re all right. Come—”

Lightning struck the mast. The deck lurched.

I dove—fell—into the sea. Safe.

Angry, fiery flashes outlined the rolling gray clouds above me when I surfaced. Thunder roared. Wood, ash, and water rained down. Salt and the tang of blood filled my mouth.

I covered my head, my eyes closed for several beats.

As the waves settled, I treaded water, looking left and right. Smoke and firelight shrouded everything in a murky haze. The ship was on its side, blocking the horizon. It was on its way down. I didn’t see a single lifeboat among the wreckage. The yells of panicked, dying men were all around me. I didn’t care about Naman or the rest of the sailors, but where . . .?

The prince didn’t make a sound as he surfaced. His eyes were closed, an open gash on his forehead. He held a board in his hands, bobbing above the surf.

His grip slipped.

It was over. He would drown. I would swim to my island, and when my sisters came, I would say I forced him under the waves and have them fetch the body. I would have his heart and join my sisters without ever lifting a finger, easier than wringing the neck of a fish.

I wouldn’t have to fight a monster or any other kind of man, but my family would still be pleased. So would Naman.

The thought of that monstrous man resparked a reckless rage in my gut. Fie my family and all gods, I didn’t want to please Naman. I wanted to unravel any dark plan he had, and I only had one more second to act. I couldn’t hesitate. The prince’s hand disappeared into the water.

I pulled him onto the board and kicked for the shore.

CHAPTER 5

A man was in my garden.

I blinked and squinted and tilted my head again and again. I wanted it all to be an illusion, a dream. Why couldn't it just be a dream?

But when I opened my eyes, the fact remained.

A man was in my garden, and it was all my fault.

The prince pushed himself from the dirt and fluttered his eyelids, lashes as long as a girl's. He coughed up water, spewing it over the sand and tall grass. His pupils were dilated and unfocused as he settled on his knees and rubbed the red scab on his forehead. Blood and grime caked the curls of his bangs—pulling at them sent dribbles of fresh blood down his brow.

He was already broken and should have died in the sea.

My sisters would have done it. They wouldn't be so weak. They would have laughed at his pain, gutted him, pulled off his legs like a crab.

I backed away in a crawl, my stomach churning at the thought.

His gaze tracked my movement, finally focusing on my face. "Hello?" The uncertainty and weakness in his voice made it a question. "I know you, don't I? You were on the ship. It . . ." He whirled his neck around, taking in the small island in a single glance. "Where is everyone else? Did they . . .?" His shoulders slumped. "They're all dead, aren't they?"

Most likely. Convenient that sailors never liked carrying women. There would be no one that Mother would be interested in saving. They would all die. They should have all died.

Why hadn't I let him die?

I rocked back and forth, sucking in air but not feeling any relief. What had I done? I told myself I saved the prince to spite Naman, but my mother

would never see it that way. I couldn't expect her to accept that explanation. She would still have wanted me to kill the prince. I *knew* she would have. In one reckless act, I had betrayed my whole family—the worst kind of daughter.

And I couldn't even bring myself to fix it now.

I couldn't just stab him while he stumbled around like a freshly birthed seal pup.

The prince shook his head. "I just spent two years in Galath. The crew were my father's men from Solis. I hardly knew them, but still I . . ." He glanced back at me. "Hey, are you hurt?"

He fumbled over the driftwood I had used to cart him through the waves. His arms flapped at his sides to steady himself. His bare foot wiggled in the sand. He had lost a sandal to the open ocean, leaving him lopsided and wide-eyed, like the grounded gull I had tried to train as a pet, before Titera ate her.

I pressed myself against a rock as he stumbled closer. This was it. I had failed. Now he was certain to turn into a beast and kill me.

Or Mother would when she found out.

The prince took my arms. I shook and shook in his grasp. "Settle down," the prince said. "I think you're in shock. Just try to breathe with me."

I fought harder.

"Do you not speak Solian? I'm afraid I don't speak much of the older languages. 'Hello, my name is Erymanthus Apollos Augustus'," he tried in the tongue native to Cypari and some of the smaller providences. Then he shook his head, switching back to Solian. "That's all I know. Wait. *This* is in Solian." He let me go and pulled the vellum codex out from under the weeds.

My book!

I leapt from the dirt and snatched it away. "Don't touch that! You shouldn't even be here."

He smiled. "So, you *do* speak Solian. That's a relief. But it seems to me that neither of us should be here. Wherever *here* is." He stepped out to scan the coast, shading his eyes. Water struck the shore in its familiar pattern, stretching out for several leagues. "Do you know which direction we drifted? It's a bit of a blur for me."

It was for me too. My heart beat too fast for me to take a proper breath. What was I thinking? Had some spirit possessed me? I didn't want him here! Whether he lived or died, he did not belong on my island. No man did.

My book fell from my loose fingers, and I sank to my knees again.

"Ari! Are you here?" Catra's voice echoed through the rocks.

The prince spun around. "Get behind me." He picked up a piece of driftwood like a club.

What in Valadern's name was he doing?

The makeshift club would never defeat a siren. It wouldn't defeat me either.

I snatched the board from his fingers as easily as my secret book. "My sisters call for me. Stay here, and I can make them leave." They couldn't discover what happened until I found a better way to explain it.

Was there a better way to explain it?

His forehead wrinkled, and he winced when the movement disturbed the red gash. "Make them leave? If your sisters are friendly, perhaps they can help us."

"They are friendly to me, not to you. Now *stay*."

I had no way to make him do anything, but I dropped the board and ran to the shore, hoping to head them off for at least a few moments longer.

When my feet touched the sand, my sisters' raised voices greeted me. They had started another argument. Neither Catra nor Corva wanted to walk ashore to find me. They slipped deeper into the surf, throwing water at each other until I appeared.

"Ari," Catra said. "Are you hurt? The storm clouds rolled in fiercer than we thought." She smiled, though. Still proud of their skill even if it could have killed me.

I shook my head, panting from my jog. "I'm fine. I couldn't get to the prince though. He made it to the shore." I pointed over rocks, past the whirlpools, and across the channel to the peninsula. It was part of Solis, technically, but too rough for any human to settle there.

Even climbing around would be a challenge.

Catra struck at the water. "You mean we have to walk all over that place looking for him? I hate walking!"

I hung my head, the shame real if nothing else. "Sorry. Perhaps I'm not fit for taking someone like the Sun Prince." Just give me another man. Any

other man.

“Don’t worry,” Corva said. “We’ll tell the others. One of us will find him.” My sisters dove into the water. They bobbed as they swam up and down like dolphins toward the peninsula.

I watched them go. How could they believe me? How could it be so easy to lie to my sisters, all to help a man? More importantly, what was I going to do now?

The prince sat in my garden with both feet now bare, eating my chickpeas and leafing through my secret book. It showed the picture of a proper prince—one with broad shoulders and the head of a serpent in his bare hands. But rather than seeming inspired or shamed, the boy just licked his fingers as he turned page after page. The paper crinkled together. What if he ripped one?

Rage boiled over as I stomped closer, but he smiled. Small traces of dried blood smeared his face. “So, your name is Ari?”

I thumped my foot on a rock. “I told you not to touch that.” I was wrong; he behaved much worse than the grounded gull. I *should* let Titera eat him.

He closed the book and set it down. “I’m sorry. I’m just trying to figure a few things out.” He offered me some of my own chickpeas. “Did you want some of these? They’re better raw than I thought they would be.”

I grew them. I knew what they tasted like.

I took them anyway. If I wasn’t going to kill the prince in a proper ceremony, there was no point in starving myself any longer.

The prince nodded and smiled like he had conned a ground shrew or gull to eat from his hands. “See? It’s not so bad. Did you live here before we found you?”

I gave no answer.

The prince tried again. “Ari?”

“Arianna, daughter of Miranda and Princess of the Deep.” I let the pea shells fall from my fingers and straightened my back. It was time he stopped acting like we were friends.

He squinted at my worn tunic and bare feet. Another smile touched his lips. “All right then. I suppose if you’re the only one here, you can have any

title you want. It’s an honor to meet you, princess.” He hit his chest and bowed his head, just as Naman had for my mother.

My mouth dropped. “You’re the Sun Prince. You haven’t heard of my mother at all?”

“Should I have? You *can* call me Erymanthus though—Erys. I think the last one to call me the ‘Sun Prince’ was the priest on my name day.”

This was ridiculous. “You need to go.” If I couldn’t kill him, he had to escape just like I told my sisters he had. He wouldn’t be dead, but on the run, unable to be traced back to me. Naman’s plans would still be foiled, and I could wash my hands of them both.

Naman would have died with the rest of the sailors anyway.

The prince climbed to his feet. “Great idea. Where should we go?” He looked past the shrubs of my sisters’ overgrown gardens and the dark caverns of my mother’s shrine as if I had proposed some sort of game.

Open water surrounded us. If he were to go anywhere without my sisters or Mother finding him, he would need a boat. Fast. Before my family stopped searching the peninsula and returned to the sea. In the water, the sirens would be able to sense anything caught in its depths.

I dragged a piece of driftwood closer, a line appearing in the dirt behind it. There would be more lumber near the rocks. “We’ll have to tie the boards together.”

“Like a raft? Perfect.” He dashed away to add another board to my pile. It didn’t seem fair that his skinny arms could haul more than me. Close up, his small frame seemed nothing but lean muscle. “Was that what you were trying to do when we picked you up on our ship? Raft away from here?”

“Why would I want to leave?” Everything I knew was here. I untangled a coil of rope caught on some twisted roots and pulled two boards together. I knelt down, trying to keep my eyes on the prince at the same time, just in case he tried something.

The prince laughed. “What do you mean, *why?* So you could live with the rest of us, of course. In a city.” He hunched down next to me.

“Why would I want to live with a man?” Didn’t he know what men were like? Was he trying to fool me, or was he just too young and stupid to know?

“Not all girls do. Some live together like the Sisters in Amerstead.” He peered at me. “You’re not a nun, are you? Taken some vow of isolation or silence or starvation or something?”

I didn’t know what a nun was, and I didn’t want to. “The city is dangerous, and I do not want to talk to you. I want you to leave before *my* sisters return.” I pointed a board at him, encouraging him to keep his distance.

The prince gaped. “You want me to leave you here? Alone? I can’t do that.”

He would try to take me with him. Perhaps I would *have* to kill him, just to prevent my own abduction.

“Besides, it would be safer if we were together.” He pushed the board between us away. No respect for boundaries at all. “I don’t believe all the monster stories, but there *are* beasts and whirlpools and a hundred other things.” He gestured to the waves.

He was right. He probably would die out there all alone and my previous attempts to save him would have been for nothing. “I will take you to the fishing village, up from the peninsula. It’s part of Solis, and there are humans there.” Then I could be back before my mother or sisters came looking. Hopefully. The spiderweb-thin strains of a plan were the best I could come up with.

The prince frowned for a long moment, and then he nodded. “That’s a good start, but you know I still will want you to come along once we get there.”

I touched the hilt of my knife behind my back. If he tried to make me go with him, I would cut him open.

CHAPTER 6

I set the wooden board on the surf and pushed down on it with my hands. Water spilled over the sides. This would never carry our weight. I dragged the board back toward the prince in my garden, shaking my head.

If I had fins, this wouldn't be an issue. If the prince were dead, this wouldn't be an issue.

If *only* . . .

His eyes bore down on me. "Have you ever built a raft before?"

My face flushed. Mother said most men thought girls were fools, but it wasn't fair. It wasn't like I had ever left the island without my family before. "It's fine. We just need to layer it more."

He crawled over, fingering all the wood. "I don't think you've even *seen* a raft before. Most of them use logs, not just flat wood." He looked back into the shrubs behind him. "Do you have any trees here? Older would be better. I don't think green wood floats."

I shoved the boards away and ground my teeth. "Would you like to build it, then?"

He laughed. "I thought we were building it together. Layering it is a good idea, and I *do* think we can use that wood. I just think we need some more logs and rope too. What do you think?"

I didn't know what to think, but I went to find the logs.

We built the raft together, but I still started every time the prince moved.

He chuckled. “You’re not used to having someone else here to talk to, are you? You really were here all alone.” He tied a knot, pulling it tight with his teeth like a beast.

And he was *always* talking. That might be why my mother chose to kill men. Even when they weren’t being vile, they just were too irritating to tolerate. “I have my sisters and my mother.” But it had been three years since the twins made the change. Having someone next to me all the time, laughing, talking, breathing all the air, was . . . odd. And a little suffocating.

“The sisters that wouldn’t like me?” He shook his head, leaning against a stray board that didn’t fit anywhere on our raft. His voice became a whisper. “They still leave you alone here most of the time, don’t they?”

“It is not their fault. They want me to join them. I just can’t. I . . .” My voice caught.

A wave of pain poured out from my chest, so deeply entrenched I hadn’t known it existed. I couldn’t stand this empty island anymore. I wanted to be with my family again, but I couldn’t be what they wanted me to be. Every action I had taken since meeting the prince was taking me further away from them, and I would be alone forever.

Tears streaked down my face without any warning.

The prince waved his arms about in a fluster and dropped the board, still looking like the grounded gull. “Oh no. What did I do? Can I help?” He touched my hand. “You’re helping me get back to Solis. Perhaps I can figure out how to help you join your family.”

Did he know how ridiculous that was? The best way he could help me was to drop dead right now. I took a step back, fleeing his touch. “You really haven’t heard of my mother at all.”

“Should I have?”

I wiped my eyes. If I told him, what would he do? Attack? Run? Whatever it was, it would only make things more complicated. I just had to get him off my island and that meant we didn’t have time for tears, either. I turned and pushed our raft toward the shore.

His hands joined mine until it skidded into the waves.

It floated.

“Let’s go.” I jumped aboard.

The raft wobbled but stayed upright. I didn’t even get my feet wet.

A smile crept over my face as I looked back at the prince. “You kick first and then me, all right?”

His smile widened again with laughter. “You think you can push me?”

I rolled my eyes. I had gotten him here, hadn’t I? Sure, I couldn’t swim like my sisters, but I bet he couldn’t either. No human could.

I jumped into the water, ready to take the first turn. “Get on.”

He took delicate, doubtful steps onto the raft. The moment both of his feet were on the wood, I plowed into the side, kicking so fast the prince fell into his seat.

I grinned as his jaw dropped.

Maybe the water wasn’t so bad after all.

My sisters could swim to the fishing village and back in a few minutes. I could see the shore from the highest point of my island. I didn’t know if I ever appreciated how much water separated us until I had to kick through it, one stroke at a time. Even trading the work with the prince, my muscles strained, and salt burned my skin.

The prince didn’t seem to have any such troubles, rambling on whenever he was on the raft. He rambled in the water too, but that was between mouthfuls of saltwater, and I didn’t have to pretend not to understand him. He became persistent, though, jumping up beside me when I turned my head. “The way you swim—it’s like those sailor stories, the sirens.”

My heart skipped a beat, and he smiled. Now he had my full attention, and he knew it.

“And you know, I think I *have* heard of Miranda. She was a princess of Cypari. A hailstorm killed my great uncle, her betrothed, so she ran out into the storm, mad with grief. Is that who you meant?”

Grief? My mother called the hail and laughed over his corpse.

“They never found her body,” he continued, waving an arm into the distance. “But she couldn’t be alive now. She would be nearly a hundred years old, if she were.”

Ninety-two, but Mother never liked anyone reminding her of her age.

“How did you know about her anyway? Were you from Cypari before you got stranded? Do you know Princess Helene or someone else in her family? You might have mixed the two since you’ve been away so long.

What other books did you have besides the one I saw?" His eyes bored into me, pressing for some answer.

He seemed determined to fit me into his world, but every version he came up with ended the same way. I was wrong; he was right. A mad girl from an island he must tutor in the ways of the real world. The implied arrogance squashed any desire I might have to share and learn.

I lowered myself into the water, ready to kick.

He shook his head. "You really are quiet. Not like any other girl I know."

"Good." Any other girl he knew had to be a brainwashed harlot or some other servant.

He laughed, standing over me. "And she speaks. Now we just have to get you to do it without crying or glaring at me."

I immediately glared, but even that seemed a game. How did he manage to turn everything into a game? His time in the water had washed most of the blood from his face. His clear cherub smile had an innocence that seemed as deceptive as my sisters' song.

I knew of the charm women held over men. I heard of the brutality men held over women. How was it that he seemed to hold the former, but none of the latter?

Perhaps he wasn't a real man at all. Perhaps he was some new creature all his own.

I held onto the raft, feet treading water idly. Something brushed my legs. Warm and slick.

A fish?

I caught a glance of something dark under the water. It fastened around my foot like a tether, yanking me downward. My chin hit the raft. Salt and blood filled my mouth. Colors flashed behind my eyes. I thrashed, something pulling me from both sides.

"Ari, stay still."

The prince's voice. It had to be. No one else would have suggested something so senseless.

The pressure left my legs, and he yanked me over him onto the raft.

A coil of a severed tentacle lay beside me. My leg still burned where I had been bound in its grasp. The prince sheathed a dagger I didn't know he had.

He had stabbed the beast and pulled me aboard. “What was that?” he asked.

Charybdis—the beast of the whirlpools who shared the channel, the beast whom men sought to avoid when they became prey to my family instead. It had never bothered me before, seeking out the larger ships.

All the creatures of the sea were servants of my mother and our god. If they were coming after me, it was only because I was acting in a way my mother would never have sanctioned. I had gone against the will of my mother and the sea. It was only fitting that it should try to claim my life in return. Death would be a relief, saving me from my building guilt and grief.

I had heard of the pale-skinned northerners killing each other this way, pulling and pulling at the limbs until the torso was ripped to pieces. Even before the beast attacked, my heart had been pulled in two directions so hard it might burst between them.

I just never expected the skinny prince to win.

He glared at the water as if daring anything else to move from its depths. “It isn’t dead, you know. We’d need a larger, stronger weapon for that, like the barbed harpoons my father used in the war with Galath.”

Before, I wouldn’t have thought he knew a thing of war. Now, I almost did.

A sudden authority entered his voice. “You’re not going back in the water. We’ll row, or I’ll kick.”

I stared.

There it was. The hard and brutal man of my mother’s tale but also the storybook prince who saved my life, wrapped in a single package. All the tales I had heard over the years could not have prepared me for this, and I had no idea what to do.

Our raft hit the shore with the moon high in the darkened sky. The prince looked up at the palm trees as our feet sank into the sand. “So where is this place exactly?”

I shrugged. Huts rested near rocks farther up the shore. Murmured voices slipped through the trees. “It’s part of Solis,” I said. “There’s a village. I see their boats out fishing sometimes.” And often their men

became meals for my family. I didn't know anything more than that. "They might help you . . . or sell you to some ship captain."

He laughed. "You think a ship captain would want me?" He flexed his thin arms. "Perhaps if I showed him the raft we built."

At least he was a boy. A captain might put him to work as a bonded oarsman, but they wouldn't violate or kill him on sight. Someone might even help him home.

I stepped away. Whatever happened, I had done my part.

He caught my hand. "Where are you going?"

"Home." Where else would I go?

His grip hardened on my wrist, and panic seeped into his tone. "You can't mean back to that island! The water is dangerous, and you'll be all alone. You could come with me. You could . . ." He tugged my arm and gestured across the sand with his free hand.

My heart beat wild. This was it. I needed my weapon, my blade, but my hands flailed without coming close to where I stored it.

He froze; his brown eyes searched mine. "You don't have to be so afraid of people, Ari." His touch became gentle, but I couldn't allow it to linger.

"You just want me to come with you, and when I refuse—"

"I would what? You think I would force you?"

I wished he would. Then I would kill him, and all my problems would be over.

His voice neared a whisper. "Ari, you saved my life."

Only because I was part of the conspiracy that put his life in jeopardy in the first place. My free hand ran over my belt. Empty. Where was my knife? Did I still need it?

"You saved me too," I said. "From the monster."

"You saved me more." He nudged me with his elbow as if it were a joke, our right hands still joined. His softness cut me more than my blade could ever wound him.

"You're the Sun Prince and—"

He let go of my hand and put two fingers on my lips, stopping my words. "I'm Erys."

Erys. I stopped searching for my knife. His face, his lips were a breath away. I could count all the hairs on his chin, like fuzz on a peach. His curls were the color of wet sand, his skin a light olive, every bit of him sparkling with the warm light of summer. A man stood before me, and I wanted to tell

him everything—all that he asked me and more. Who my mother really was. Naman's betrayal before my family killed the whole crew. How and why I wanted to kill a prince before I saw his face or learned his name. That I thought he might be worth saving now, but my family would never understand and never agree.

So many words, but none of them would leave my throat.

He pulled out my knife. He had stolen it and carried it the whole time after using it to stab Charybdis.

He gave it back to me now, hilt first. I had been defenseless with him for over an hour without realizing it. But the anger I wanted to feel toward him never surfaced. It had morphed into a desire I didn't know I had—to feel so vulnerable and safe all at once. To have a man look at me so earnestly. He was strong. He was clever, and so unbelievably kind. He could have overpowered me so many times, but he protected me instead. I craved his presence more than breath, and I couldn't take the blade—part of me afraid I would stab him, part of me afraid I wouldn't.

All of me hating that I had to make the choice at all.

Though really, I had made my choice the moment I pulled him from the sea. I wouldn't stab him, not even with the knife in my hand and him standing a breath away. He was either the dumbest man alive or the smartest; he made his murder impossible by making it so easy.

I couldn't stab him no matter what my family said or thought about it later.

I was going to let him go, and if he kept trying to take me with him, I would . . .

I would . . .

He took my hand again, brushing it against his lips and bowing his head. "Thank you for helping me, Princess Arianna. You did not have to. I'd love to show you my city sometime, but I would never force you to go anywhere." He let me go.

I watched Erys walk away, leaving shallow footprints in the sand.

The sand back on my island was unmarked, untouched. No man or anyone else to break its simple perfection. I wouldn't have to think about the Sun Prince ever again.

He had already disappeared among the distant huts and palms.

My hand came to my chest, feeling the unsteady beats of my heart. I waited for relief to sweep over me. I should have felt relieved.

I *wanted* to be relieved.

I turned back to where the water silently lapped over the sand. It seemed so empty.

Why did I think I had to return to my island? The sea never held anything for me.

I put my knife away as my heart leapt forward with a new resolve. I would call back Erys, my grounded gull and my storybook prince. He would let me go with him. I would tell him everything, and then we would . . .

A shadowed figure rose from the waves, like a ghost from the grave.

Dark, damp hair shrouded Titera's accusing gray eyes. "Arianna. What have you done?"

CHAPTER 7

Titera pulled me from the waves onto the shore of my island. Sand scraped my legs before I found my feet. She stood in front of me on her human legs, wet hair draped over her chest. The veins on her neck and near her tattooed arms seemed close to bursting. “I knew you were the wrong one to send. You couldn’t wring the neck of a fish.”

I winced, my knees shaking. “He was kind to me.” The words were weak even in my own ears. Titera was the only one of my sisters who ever scared me.

She laughed, something close to a cackle. “Of course he was. Haven’t you heard a word Mother has said? The people of the sun are clever. He must’ve seen that you were weak and exploited it to his own advantage.”

My blood ran cold at the thought. I let her drag me another step toward the rocks, thinking of the desperate sailor I might have pitied and saved from Serena before I saw his knife. Could Erys do that? Put on a mask of pleasantness, just to spare his life?

Was I really such a fool?

“Just wait until Mother hears,” Titera said.

She had called Mother. Of course she had.

We stood on the same cliff where I had summoned Mother for Naman. My other sisters broke through the surf, never raising more than their eyes above the water. Then Mother appeared in a great whirlpool. Thunder and lightning cracked in her anger as she positioned herself on the same rock spire she had used before.

“Mother, I found her.” Titera pushed me to the rocks in front of her. “We were walking those cliffs, searching for the prince, and the moment I went

to the waves to refresh myself, the blood of Charybdis cried to me of her treachery. I went to the fishing village and I see . . .” She shook her head like the words wouldn’t form past the disgust on her tongue. “She was with the Sun Prince. She could have killed our greatest enemy and she just let him walk away.”

Mother stayed as still as a statue, a pillar reigning over the storm. “Explain yourself.”

Part of me wanted to add my own voice to the raging storm. How could Mother have not prepared me better? How could Erys be nothing like she told me he would be?

If he had been a beast, I could have killed him without question!

But my mother’s hard eyes silenced any thought of such a response. Was there any answer she would accept? Naman’s betrayal wasn’t strong enough, but there had to be something.

“I-I just thought that it would be more to our advantage to leave Erys alive. The Sun Prince, I mean.” He couldn’t be Erys. He couldn’t be mine.

Titera spun her head. Her grip became painful. “Don’t you dare lie. This deceitful girl has fallen in love with our sworn enemy.”

Vi rose from the water enough for me to see her hand point back to the twins, her eyes dull. “They keep men all the time. They take legs for them and soon they will be fat by them.”

Catra shrugged, unrepentant. “It’s no fun to kill them so quickly.”

“You should see how they flatter and serve when they know the end is coming.” Corva’s eyes became wistful. “They make such nice little pets . . . for a few days, at least. Then it’s all whining and begging, and they really start to smell. We’ve never kept one more than a week.” She flicked the water dismissively.

Mother’s gaze stayed fixed on me, never blinking through my twin sisters’ confession.

And why should she? Mother had produced my sisters and me in a host of similar liaisons. Only Vi was dogmatic enough not to see it.

“To use a man for our own pleasure and to create daughters for ourselves is one thing,” Mother said. “Forming an attachment and allowing him to dominate is another. Is that what happened, Ari? Have you allowed a man to claim your heart?”

A lifeline. Perhaps my only one. I had to say something. “No. Of course, I didn’t. I just thought . . . that if he was in love with me, then per-

perhaps we could use him instead.”

A breath of air, near a growl, escaped my mother’s lips. “He is the son of Solis and his death would strike a blow to their whole providence. What better use could he be?”

“No, it wouldn’t.”

I watched even Titera’s expression go slack, her arm loosening on mine as if afraid to be caught in the crossfire of my mother’s temper. Water struck against rock in a death toll.

But an eerie calm filled my breast. My words became firm. I was already in the worst trouble I could imagine. Nothing I could say could possibly make it any worse.

I had this one chance, and I was going to use it no matter how much I stumbled.

“You killed the prince before, and nothing changed,” I said. “You had to flee, and a different prince was crowned in his place. Erymanthus, the Sun Prince now, thinks you were a mad woman. He thinks you raced into that storm and killed yourself out of grief when your prince died.”

Mother jerked her head back as if I had slapped her.

I had to keep going, press the only advantage I had. “If I killed this prince, as you did, nothing changes. But now that I have left him alive, he will carry my name back to his city. They will know—they will all—”

“She will say anything to save herself.” Titera spoke with a hiss, exposing the points of her canines.

Save myself? The words sank into me with a new level of severity. I hated my family’s displeasure, but was I bartering for something more? Would they kill me, let me bleed on the altar in the prince’s place?

The silence seemed to confirm my planned demise. Perhaps Erys had understood the way of things better than I. Perhaps I should have followed him into whatever city he offered.

I should have begged him for the opportunity.

Mother sank into the water and stepped onto the sand, her back straight, her legs sure. Wind swept through her raven hair. My heart beat faster with each step until she reached my side, and Titera dropped me fully at her feet.

“Arianna is right,” Mother said. “A victor does not hide under the moon and waves while they have the sun. They should know our names. They should *all* be made to tremble, while we reclaim our rightful place as the rulers of the moon *and* sun.”

She took my arm, grip just as tight as Titera's had been, and lifted me upward to face her. "And if this prince truly could be made to love you, you could be his queen."

CHAPTER 8

Mother dragged me across the island where the grass and sand gave way to dark rocks and crafted columns. To the one place I never wished to linger, the shrine of our god.

I said “our” god, but no one could own Valadern. Worshiping him was like bowing to a wolf, hoping that, as the most beloved of his sheep, we would be the last to be eaten.

But that didn’t seem to matter anymore. I couldn’t be scared of Valadern or anything else after hearing my mother’s words. “You want me to marry Prince Erymanthus? Like a princess?” My head filled with images, not from Mother’s story, but from my secret storybook. Could she arrange something like that? If she could, I would proclaim her name to everyone! They might tremble, but I would cheer and dance in the glorious sun.

“Foolish girl. You’ve always been a princess; you will just have to be human for a time. This will take work.” She let me go at the entrance to the cavern so she and my sisters could don the embroidered hoods and robes marking them as priestesses to Valadern. The long cloth draped over their arms and faces like shrouds over the dead.

“I *am* human,” I said. But my mother’s voice had such authority, I glanced downward.

Yes. Human legs, just where I left them. Trembling and as useless as reeds.

“Physically, yes. But you must be able to live among the surface dwellers.” She pulled me deeper into the shadows until I walked on my own. There was no more need to drag me through such a narrow tunnel—Mother at my front and my sisters trailing behind. The jagged stalagmites

made a wall of stony teeth until it opened up into a wider cavern. Water dripped from a small opening in the celling, letting in the soft glow of moonlight.

The rest of the cave was so dark, I stepped into a puddle of water before stopping.

One of my sisters ignited an oil lamp, exposing the underground stream that kept the cavern musty and cold. We stopped at the bloodstained altar. The same altar claimed the lives of Mother's three male children along with all my sisters' first victims.

The same altar that should have also taken the life of the prince.

Mother had carved an icon of our god into a central rock spire, and above it, a stone shelf held a line of dark urns, a line of hearts. My sisters knelt below them in a solemn procession.

Titera smiled as if she still expected my blood to stain the stone.

Mother covered her hair with the hood of her robe, kneeling in front of the altar. "Great One."

Blood. I need blood. The words vibrated through the rocks.

I shrank away, but my eyes still found the icon of a bare-chested man covered in hair and holding a trident. My mother's god and patron—a voice of nightmares that made my blood run colder than the sea.

"In a moment, Your Greatness," my mother said in a purr my sisters might use with their song, soothing their victims. "My daughter has come to ask a boon of you." She pulled me down at her side so I was kneeling too. "Arianna is to enter Solis, help us to reclaim our place as rulers of the moon and the sun."

Mother explained my newfound connection with the prince to the unseen voice. I saw nothing except shadows, but it seemed the cave had eyes that could see me at every angle. The unseen god was sizing me up, and I was sure to be found wanting.

You know I have longed for such an opportunity. The Sun Dwellers have accepted a new god and do not fear and serve me as they once did, but this plan is dangerous. Your daughter is still immature and would not be the first we have lost to them.

"It is a risk," Titera agreed—slow and careful as not to trigger our mother's wrath. "I understand if you wish to reclaim the throne of the Sun Dwellers. It is your right to rule all the providences, but why trust this to Ari? We don't need anyone to pretend to be human if we took the palace by

force.” Even under their hoods, both her and Vi looked eager for a direct fight.

“Perhaps, but our powers are weaker on land.” Mother turned her head, speaking again to the unseen voice of our god. “The prince is to be married in three months, three cycles of the moon. Give my daughter that time to win his heart, and we stand to gain an insider foothold to reclaim the empire in your name. If not, we can still go as Titera says. There will be no risk to anyone.” No risk to anyone that would matter to my mother at least.

The risk would be for the humans and for myself if I failed.

The voice retreated, sounding at a distance. *Your daughter is immature. I cannot help her until she has made a pact with me.*

“Well, go on.” Mother forced my knife into my hand and pushed me toward the altar.

They all waited for me to rip open my own flesh.

“I have to give him my blood?” My voice trembled and fell.

“The blood is just a symbol.”

A symbol. Did that make it more or less dangerous? Would giving my blood “symbolically” drain my soul, just as when my family took blood from their male victims?

I turned my head as Titera sighed. “Come on, Arianna,” she said. “We’ve all done it. You can’t expect to receive power for nothing.”

I held the knife over one hand. There might not be any getting out of it, but the blade shook in my grasp. “Will it hurt?”

Of course not. There was a hint of laughter in the voice that did not reassure me.

“Will I still be . . . human?”

“I have told you,” Mother said. “In order to become one with me and your sisters you must present the heart of a human sacrifice. You will remain human. You must if you expect to blend in with the Sun Dwellers.”

I stared past the blade, watching a snail slime its way up the base of the altar, unable to think of another reason to delay things. This wasn’t like Erys or even a fish. I could give my own blood if it would please Mother.

My hand rose. The sharp edge of the blade glittered in the lamplight.

My blood splattered on the altar.

The voice had lied. It hurt a lot. More than a normal cut would, and I was certain each drop carried a piece of my soul. My breath hitched. It

seemed something had caught hold of my neck, squeezing the lifeforce out of me. Black spots appeared.

I coughed and stumbled until my mother slapped me on the back. “Ari, are you all right?”

I opened my mouth. Nothing. I coughed and tried again. My voice! What happened to my voice? I put my hands around my throat, my eyes so wide my mother started to nod.

“That’s the price, then. Not to worry. Whatever you get in return will be far greater.”

I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t scream. My voice was gone! How could anything replace that?

The blood on the altar bubbled like boiling water on the stone surface. Smoke seeped into the mass of blood until it grew, engulfing the snail. The creature retreated into its shell and spun like a top on the altar’s surface. After a few silent beats of my heart, something emerged from the coiled shell, a black imp the size of a bullfrog—a slimy bullfrog with a tail and crumpled wings.

She stretched out her wings, still dripping with slug slime, and glanced up at us with yellow eyes. “Greetings.” It was my voice, coming from an imp’s mouth. “I am Lilthe. I shall be your daughter’s voice and guide among the humans.”

“Perfect,” Mother said. “Men care more about looks anyway.”

How could she be so sure? All Erys seemed to do was talk and demand I do the same.

Perhaps she didn’t know men as well as she claimed.

Give the shell to Arianna, the voice demanded. *It will allow us to call you, to see what you see, and if you ever need to speak, Lilthe will speak for you.*

Mother nodded, like it all was perfectly expected. She picked up the creature’s shell and used a leather cord to tie it to my neck like a charm, a token of the oath I just made. “You will go to Solis. You will become their queen. You will make way for us to enter and claim the empire. And then you will take the prince’s heart. You will not be able to mess anything up this time.”

I wouldn’t be able to mess up. Erys was going to die.

The words echoed through my mind. The warning was clear. I had to become the queen that Mother wanted and take the heart or lose my own. I would still become a siren in the waves.

My island, my garden held no comfort for me that night. I knew it would be my last. I didn't even try to get my secret book from the weeds.

I would have cried, but my own voice sang. The imp, Lilthe, glided down with her bat-like wings to land at my side. In the darkness, I could just make out the outline and her yellow eyes.

"Your voice is gorgeous. I really love it." She sang another few notes—her throat pouch expanding at the end. "Are you sure you never called the elements or made the water move before? I'm sure you could if you tried."

How was I supposed to try anything now? I didn't have my voice. The creature had stolen it from me.

She cocked her head. "Are you mad at me? Because I took your voice? But I only want to help. That's all I was made to do. And when we're with the humans, I'll speak for you, say whatever you want."

That couldn't be all. She was here to make sure I never made a mistake.

"Oh, that's just what your mother assumed, but all I want to do is make you happy."

How could she know what would make me happy? How were we having a conversation at all?

She smiled. "That's right. We're bonded by blood. I can read your thoughts."

So, she already knew. I hadn't guarded my thoughts at all.

"You're in love with the prince, or at least you think you are. You want to marry him without killing him. It sounds dreadfully boring to me, but if that's what you want . . ."

She would let me save Erys?

"Yes, but I'm not so sure that is what you really want. Your mother's stories of men might have been . . . incomplete, but they are not untrue. You still have much to learn."

She paused, letting me feel the full weight of the words before she smiled again.

"But your mother doesn't care about that boy; she simply wants to take her revenge on Solis through him. So give it to her. Become his queen, give her access to the throne she craves and a whole host of new subjects to rule and feed on. Then say the boy is yours in the same way your sisters keep

men—call him your pet, your prize, and she will not object. Valadern would not object and even let you make the siren's bond with another sacrifice if that is your wish. Be her most dutiful and beloved daughter, and your mother will reward you just as Valadern rewards all his priestesses."

I wouldn't have to kill Erys? That was all I wanted. Erys wouldn't be my pet—I never wanted a man like that, but I could say I did if that would be enough to spare his life. Other men might be the beasts my mother claimed, and she could feast on all of Solis if she wished, but if I could save Erys, long enough to see if his heart was truly mine, that would be enough.

"Perfect," Lilthe said. "That should be our deal, you and I. Claim that boy's heart in love only. Get him to marry you, give your mother full access to his empire, and then, as the victor, you shall decide his fate. You might still decide to kill him then, but it would be your choice."

I never would.

"You seem so sure. I think I shall enjoy this bargain very much."

CHAPTER 9

I pictured it over and over again, resurfacing on the shore near the fishing village. Like a leap back in time, Erys would still be there, offering to show me the whole empire in the same vibrant color of my storybook. But all I saw was an empty stretch of sand.

A cold breeze trickled through the palm leaves, slipping through the folds of my tunic. I clutched my arms together tighter as if they could provide more warmth. One small step and then another led me toward the weak lights of the village, where oil lamps hung over the windows. I would find Erys again soon. I just needed to make it on my own for a bit.

Well, not quite alone.

Dark wings flapped ahead of me, landing on a rock spire. Yellow eyes gleamed in the moonlight, brighter than the lamplight I followed. “You need to move quicker than that. Do you want some man to catch you walking the streets at night?” The imp lectured me in my own voice.

I stared past her to the thatched roofs and weathered huts. It couldn’t be that dangerous. Erys said I didn’t need to be afraid.

Lilthe laughed. “In that case, why don’t we just ask a man?”

I would. I walked until I found one standing by the shore. Now what?

The imp flew to my neckline, twisting herself into her coiled shell. “Just hold onto me, and I will speak for you. No one will know the difference.”

Once my hand was on the shell, I crept closer to the man. Cloth hung around his loins, nothing else. He recoiled rope and straightened up baskets taken from a moored fishing boat tied to a post. His wild hair shook, and his muscles stretched with every movement.

I took a step forward. Then another one.

He looked up, and my heart sped to my throat. He stared, but even if I could speak on my own, I couldn’t think of a single thing to say to him. My mother and sisters were leagues away, and he was a man. Not a skinny boy who had lost his sandals, but a broad-shouldered man with hair sprouting all over his naked torso.

I swallowed hard. I could do this. I had to do this, or I would never see Erys again.

I tightened my grip on the shell and opened my mouth. “Can . . . can you help me?”

Must Lilthe make me sound so weak? But then, if I had control of my own voice, I wasn’t certain I would sound any stronger. I held onto the post like a lifeline.

He eyed the length of my legs. A smile formed, hints of laughter in his words. “Missed your quota, girlie? Aye, I can help.” He put down the rope. “Got a whole shipload that can help you. What are you charging?”

“I just want to know . . . how to get to Solis. The palace where the prince lives, I mean.”

“That all?” He walked away from the boat, closer to me. “Girl, you aren’t charging enough, but I’ll help you. If you want to join our crew, we could even find you a good Madame who’ll set you up better.” He lunged for my hand and caught my wrist.

I stumbled against the post, the man pressing against me. My back hit the wood with a light thump before I remembered the knife belted on my back. Could I reach it?

He laughed, using his other hand to lift my chin. “Don’t tell me it’s your first time. I’ll tell you everything you want to know, but you have to fill your part of the bargain first.”

My mouth opened. Lilthe gave a weak cry in my voice, but it wasn’t enough. I wanted to scream, reaching for a sound down in the depths of my soul. His lips were on me, his teeth. Bile filled the back of my throat as I cried for something words could not express.

His hand moved from my chin to my heaving chest.

Thunder cracked, and he turned his head.

There was my chance. My free hand, that had been holding the imp necklace and guarding my chest, moved to my back. I pulled my knife and slashed at the air blindly. The blade cut the cord of my necklace. The hand on my wrist opened in surprise.

“Hades’s fire,” he cursed, using the Galathian name for the God of the Underworld.

I hit the ground before I scrambled into a dead run. The sand under my feet gave way to dirt, then cobblestone. My feet beat against the stone—an empty, solitary echo. I passed several dark buildings until I realized no one was following me.

Had Lilthe helped me somehow?

I wasn’t going to question it. I fled into the night.

The knife never left my hand as I ran. I stumbled into a white stone before feeling my neck. It burned from where I had yanked myself away, the necklace still gone.

I didn’t see Lilthe. I was alone.

But I was used to being alone. I wanted to be alone. I never wanted to see another man again. My breath came in ragged gasps as I clutched the marble stone for support.

A long howl made my blood freeze. I took a step back and immediately stumbled. The ground was unlevel—filled with mounds and sunken places. A graveyard.

The howling beast charged through the dirt and weeds. In the dark, it seemed nothing but white fangs, yellow eyes, and thick fur so black I couldn’t tell where it ended.

Could I run again? I had to try. My legs burned as I climbed the stone, larger than the rest with a marble cherub as my new neighbor. I put myself between its outstretched wings as the beast whined and pawed the stone. It could almost reach me, just by standing on its hind legs.

I held my knife in front of my face.

What was this thing? There was no room for a creature this size on my island!

“What was that? Cerberus?” a man asked, and the light of a torch came closer.

The beast’s ears twitched, and he danced between us, demanding help to bring me from my perch. The man took a hold of the scruff on the creature’s neck before he found me.

This fat, balding man also looked at my legs, but instead of an eager smile, he frowned, as if the sight of them offended him deeply. He raised his voice, waving his arms at me. “Away with you. This is a house of worship. We do not permit your kind here.”

Another figure appeared next to the man as the creature continued to whine.

“Brother Furgus, there is no need for that. Can’t you see she’s scared to death?” A veil covered the woman’s hair, a white cloth about her face. Black cloaked the rest of her body like the priestess robes my family sometimes wore.

I refused to come down, but she shook her head.

“You don’t have to worry about Cerberus.” She petted the creature. “He might be a boarhound and meant to guard the place, but he doesn’t have the heart for it. He wouldn’t know what to do with a boar or bandit if he caught one.”

A hound? The creature was a *dog*? How did it get so big?

They were all still looking at me. The woman had to be safer than the man and the dog. She would help me, if anyone could. I sheathed my knife and slid from the gravestone.

The woman led me inside the stone building. I glared at the man’s retreating back, calling the man and the dog beasts equally with my eyes.

Mother was right. Lilthe was right. Men were horrible.

CHAPTER 10

The robed woman stopped in a large room lit with candles. Rows of benches filled up most of the space. Candle smoke and frankincense scented the air. My breath caught in the gaze of a dying man, head turned, mouth open in agony. I almost pulled for my knife when I realized it was only a painted portrait—a sacrificial scene I had grown used to thanks to my family of sirens, but this man had been set on a post for the birds to feed instead of an altar. What kind of place was this?

"What's your name?" the woman whispered behind me.

I turned, reading the wrinkled creases around her smile, the age spots on her round cheeks, and warmth of her brown eyes, but I had no way to answer. Lilthe was gone.

"Are you dumb, or are you foreign?" That question also had to be left unanswered. She tried again. "Do you understand me?"

I nodded. I could do that much. It seemed I would have to convince everyone in Solis to ask me only yes or no questions until I found Lilthe again.

"You can sit here, dear." The woman waved to a chair behind all the pews. "What were you doing out so late?"

I sank into my seat. I wasn't doing anything wrong. At least I didn't think so. If a woman couldn't walk and ask for directions in this village then it was worse than my mother had described.

I glared in the direction of the man outside, blaming him for everything that happened before. When my mother and sisters took over the providences, I would be sure that they killed that man and the fisherman first. Maybe I would watch.

The woman followed my gaze then shook her head. “Don’t be so hard. He might be a priest, but he’s still a man and you must consider . . . Well, there is a certain kind of woman who walks the streets at night dressed the way you do.” She gestured to the length of my legs, exposed under my short tunic. “They tend to be selling.”

Selling? Selling what? My eyes widened.

Oh.

Women wanted to sell that? Didn’t the men just take it?

“You would do better to avoid associating yourself with that crowd,” she said.

I certainly didn’t mean to. I wasn’t used to wearing much clothing, but there never was anyone else to see me. Except for my family. I pulled my legs up onto the bench, but it wouldn’t hide me.

The woman hunched down and patted my shoulder. “We’ll get you something different to wear. Though I don’t suppose you could tell me where you came from? What happened to your family?”

I wouldn’t tell her even if I could talk, but my eyes strayed to the farthest window anyway, the one facing the sea.

“A shipwreck?”

I let the lie stand. My family often visited shipwrecks. Or caused them.

“You poor dear,” she said. “Would you like to stay in the convent tonight? Only women live on this side, and we can keep you away from the priests if it would help.” She gestured to the darkened hallways. “I’m Sister Leah.”

She wasn’t my sister. Wait. Was she a nun? Part of a group of women living together like Erys had said? I scanned the room with a new interest. Icons of the tortured man stood facing all the pews. An altar stood among the benches. It was a place of worship, but I didn’t smell dried blood. Didn’t they bleed for this god as we did for ours?

Well, at least it was familiar. Valadern might curse me for entering the chapel of another god, but that seemed a lesser concern compared to what I had faced outside.

I followed Sister Leah to the back hallways, passing a tray on a table.

The glittering copper caught my gaze. I took a coin from an open tray. On one side was a picture of the sun for Solis, but on the other was the prince’s profile. Erys.

Sister Leah shook her head. “Now you’re a bold thief, to do it in front of my face. Those are donations and tithes from the village.”

I pointed to the prince’s picture and out the window a dozen times. She had to understand. It wasn’t the coin I wanted.

“You want to go somewhere?”

I nodded and tried again.

She laughed. “You want to see the prince? The picture is prettier.”

I disagreed. The pictures of princes held in my vellum codex were different from meeting Erys in the flesh, but he was much better than a picture and I had to see him again. I had to become his queen, to see if he truly was my love or if it had been an act like my family and Lilthe had implied. I had to learn if he was a beast or something from a storybook who would be worth defending from the coming storm. To kill him or love him until I died.

“You can’t just go to the palace unannounced,” Sister Leah said. “They’ll likely have you whipped.”

They would?

She put her hand over mine. “Keep the coin. But if you wish to stay here, you are going to have to work, and we’ll have to call you something.” She thought for a moment. “Anne, perhaps?”

It was so close that it seemed there should be some way to prod her to the right name, but I couldn’t think of anything. I would have to be Anne if I wanted to stay.

There were fifty benches in the chapel. I knew. I scrubbed each and every one the next morning, after all the sisters chanted in prayer. As I continued my work, I found other statues in the room besides the tortured man. A huntress with a bow. A man with wings on his feet. Another with a laurel of grapes and raising a cup to the heavens. Then I froze next to a statue with a thick beard and carrying a trident in his hand. Could it be?

“That’s Valadern.”

Sister Leah’s voice invaded my thoughts. I jumped and turned.

She stood in her dark habit by the entrance, holding up a candle as we both peered closer at the stone figure. “I’ve also heard him called Neptune

or Poseidon. One of the dark gods, banished by our lord. A minor one, I believe. Some of the local sailors cannot put their suspicions completely aside and call him a saint. They say he controls the tides or something."

Valadern was the God of the Sea. The god of rain and thunder and oceans so vast they reached into the underworld, claiming him a portion of the world of the dead. The god who changed my family into immortal sirens and stole my voice. I had heard of his other names as well, but they seemed better suited for a kinder, lesser god than the one we worshiped.

How could a god like Valadern be considered minor? Be called a saint, just to appease "superstitious" sailors? It was ridiculous, and I let her read it from my face.

"Our god created the whole earth. Any other power is minor besides him." She gestured back to the painting of the tortured man, and I wanted to laugh.

Despite my ignorance of most things in Solis, I should have expected that the sisters worshiped the One God. Mother said all the providences claimed to. She had also said the god had harsh and strict morals that made the priests of Cypari forbid her from all mortal indulgences and cursed her natural powers over the storms. But they were all hypocrites, never reaching the perfection they preached. That was why Mother threw off their chains and expectations and picked a god who pleased her better. One who added to her power and helped her take her revenge on everyone who once held her bound. One who made her a siren.

I knew of my mother's triumph, but I had never expected her former opponent to be so pitiful. I had seen the sisters worship, clutching small crosses near their breasts and talking of lambs and babies and some vapor god who filled the whole earth. I assumed the man pictured a previous sacrifice they had used to appease their vapor god, not the god himself.

And he hadn't even answered them, for all their prayers.

Why would an all-powerful god be so silent? Why would he be pictured as a baby or in his death throes? Neither image inspired much confidence.

Valadern could make a mountain tremble.

Leah took the rag from my hand. "Come along, Anne. I wanted to show you something."

I followed her down the hall to a room filled with robed and balding men. As Leah had said, women lived mostly separated. It had been easy to avoid the men. Seeing them now, my heart raced even if my feet could not.

But none of the men glanced up as I approached. Heads down, they scrawled characters across stacks of parchment. Colored ink gave life to the lettering, adding green vines, red flowers, blue water. Pictures filled the margins, just like my secret book.

I yanked on Sister Leah's sleeve, begging her to fill the air with some words to fit this wonder since I could not.

She smiled. "I thought you might like this. These men have dedicated themselves as scribes of the holy word. I've heard of some poets doing the same to old fables as well. It's a written language, a way to communicate even without speech."

I had seen letters before. I had seen a whole book. She must think me horribly ignorant, but I couldn't begin to remove the wonder from my gaze. If only Mother had deemed it important for her daughters to read, then I could *really* show her.

"I thought, if you worked with the scribes, you could learn to communicate better."

Work with the scribes? But they were all *men*. Grown men. Scowling men. I could never do that. I looked at Sister Leah with a raised eyebrow, certain she should understand.

It wasn't like she wanted to live with the men either.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Some say reading and writing is unfit work for a woman—a wife—but if you took the vows and stayed here, it would never be a question. You would be doing it to help the order."

Help the order; swear to another god. That seemed worse than working with men. Mother would kill me. Or even if she didn't, Valadern might. I had just sworn myself to him before coming here. He probably wouldn't like me to stay for even one more night in a worship house where his image was so degraded. I should leave. I looked to the door and trembled, wondering if I was ready to brave the outside world again.

The world filled with dogs and men and who knew what else.

Sister Leah reached for my hand, and I started.

She laughed. "Child, you don't have to be so timid, whatever you are running from. We have sanctuary in these walls. In this house, no power exists but that of our god."

I didn't believe her. Not then. But I couldn't be scared of the nuns or their pitiful god. I didn't work with the scribes or take any oaths to make

my stay permanent, but I felt safe here and I didn't want to leave quite yet. A week passed, and then another.

The place was timeless. I knew that I only had two more months before my mother's deadline. I should be going to the palace to complete my mission, but with my first experience on the streets and Sister Leah there to confirm that my entrance into the palace on my own would be unlikely, I kept waiting for Lilthe to find me again. And even when she didn't, I never tried to venture out alone. I would justify staying one more night, thinking somehow that would make me better prepared to face the world of men that now surrounded me.

Really, it wasn't so bad staying here. Though our opposing gods should have made us natural enemies, I couldn't help but like the sisters. I liked listening to their laughter and singing in the halls, like hearing my actual sisters' voices on the island. I liked listening to the stories of the ones who served the village as teachers or nurses. I liked listening to the senile ones talk of angel visits in the larder and "the way things used to be." I soaked it all up, and there were nights where I didn't think of leaving at all.

I slept in the dorms with two other girls closer to my age, novices. After the day was over and they shook their hair from their habits, they spoke in solemn voices of all they had given up to be here—isolated to the convent. Of all the men and pleasures they had before. I hardly believed their stories but compared to the island the convent already seemed like a dream. One filled with just enough activity and people to fill me up without setting my feet running.

And the priests, the men, hardly came at all except to lord distantly over some of their worship services. I could handle that.

Even the boarhound, Cerberus, was friendly, once I got to know him. He never minded that I couldn't talk and would follow me around the yard whining for a belly rub or treat. I was his most shameless benefactor. I even copied his movements sometimes, as he already seemed an expert in making his wants known without a proper voice.

And when the other nuns started calling me Sister Anne, linking me with the novices, I didn't do a thing to stop them.

CHAPTER 11

"Sister Anne?" The shout seemed loud and desperate, but I didn't hurry. People liked to shout at me, but they rarely meant anything by it. It seemed they assumed that just because I couldn't speak, I must be deaf as well. But if I were deaf, did they truly think shouting would have any impact?

And sometimes, I heard things—the kind of things that normally a person would whisper. It was like having a magical power, to be fully in the room and do nothing to hide my presence, yet still have people tell me what they thought or planned without a filter. I knew every time Sister Joan had an impure thought or one of the fathers took an extra pastry from the larder.

Whatever their secrets were, they would certainly be safe with me.

I finally joined Sister Leah on the outside steps. On the footpath, four large men and a pair of oxen stood near an elaborate carriage. Several women—in long stolas instead of habits—were unloading sacks and crates from another storage cart. "There she is," said Sister Leah, calling me over. "Sister, would you mind showing these young ladies to the guest rooms?"

I held out my hands for the bags, but the pickle-faced servant wouldn't give them to me right away. She rattled off a whole list of things that needed to be done and must *not* be done in setting up one of the rooms. "Did you get that?"

I nodded, but she wasn't looking at me as she searched the cart for another bag.

She turned and asked the question again, now more irritated. "I said, did you get that?"

Sister Leah moved to stand in front of me. “Sister Anne has taken a vow of silence.”

I didn’t know why Sister Leah always said that—like it should be less shameful for me to willingly take on a handicap than to have it as a curse. I couldn’t think of anything more stupid—like starving to death in front of a banquet of roasted gulls. If I could talk, there would be no good reason to stop.

The new woman frowned at me. “I hope she can still settle things quickly. Princess Helene needs her rest. We’re going to reach the palace day after tomorrow.”

They were going to the palace? I reached for my coin.

Sister Leah laughed. “Now you’ve got her started. She’s obsessed with the prince.”

“Is she?” Another young woman with a small, upturned nose came into the conversation, and everyone stiffened their backs. She had her long dark hair tied back and golden fastenings on her stola. I guessed her to be near my twin sisters’ age—three or four years older than myself. “And she hasn’t taken the full vows yet? She’s still a novice?”

No. I hadn’t taken any vows. Sister Leah had explained that I could serve as a novice for two years before that would become a question.

The young woman clapped her hands like she had discovered an extra sweet on her plate. “Well, that’s just perfect. One of my handmaidens ran off when she found out I would be living in Solis. What do you think about taking her place and coming to the palace with me?”

The palace? I smiled and nodded in the desperate, expressive way I had learned. When a smile and a nod was all you had to share your joy, you had to make them count.

Sister Leah smiled too, but only until the new women were out of sight.

Then the creases on her face deepened. “Come along, Anne,” she said, shaking her head as I followed after her. “Is this what you want, child? I know you fancy the prince, but you’re such a timid lass. A *good* lass. I won’t have those highbred hounds at the palace make crow food of you.”

I barely heard her words. My eyes were far away until Cerberus jumped up to lick my face. I would miss him most of all. This place had been my sanctuary, but it couldn’t hold me. I had only two months left to win over my prince and, now that the path stood open, I had to see him again.

Sister Leah let out a sigh. “Only a princess would think that turning a waif into a handmaiden is an easy task. We barely had you trained up here and getting things ready for the wedding won’t be easy.”

The wedding? My head jerked up. I bobbed my shoulders in what would be a simple shrug, but between the sisters and me it had become a full query. What wedding?

“Of course, the wedding. Why do you think Princess Helene has come to Solis? She is to wed the Sun Prince before the year is out.”

Erys. My Erys.

CHAPTER 12

Princess Helene's three other handmaidens reminded me of the novice sisters with how they gossiped, but they more often had their noses in the air. The carriage was too rocky when they rode with the princess. The dirt too abundant when they walked. And the freak was staring at them.

That was me. I stared more earnestly.

They deserved it. As the lowest in their social order, they gave me what they deemed were the worst chores—anything to do with the princess's toilet. That girl couldn't do *anything* for herself. And I never got to ride in the carriage, either. I walked every step of that dirty, uneven road that tested the calluses on my feet.

But we were getting closer to the palace. I could tell, because the gossip changed.

"He must be so handsome," one of the older handmaidens said. She slid her hand through her hair, pulling out dirt and twigs as we walked. "I always wanted to meet a prince."

The other nodded. "They said his grandfather wrestled a lion. And that *his* grandfather was raised by them. He's sure to be a great warrior."

I laughed—or at least I made the motion with the rise of my chest and the upturn of my lips. I couldn't make a sound. And Erys couldn't kill a fish.

The first girl glared at me. "You think something is funny?"

Yes, but I shook my head.

It seemed in at least one respect I was more of an expert than these girls.

That didn't last long. As we continued down the road, it widened. More and more people passed alongside us, filling the space. Men with sticks

leading goats. Women carrying weaved baskets. Children that bounced with every step. Wrinkled faces and a man with only one hand. Things I had never seen before; things I never even heard of. The upturned dust, the smell, the noise. Thicker and thicker. Louder and louder. How could anyone stand it?

When we passed through the gates into the capital city, I could hardly keep my breath.

The road was wide, but the crowds and the too-large buildings still felt close enough to swallow me whole. The second storage cart wouldn't even fit. That would have to stay behind with a few of the princess's men until the traffic lessened at nightfall.

I wished I could have stayed with it. My head ached with too many sights, too many sounds. Goats bleating, people shouting. Off-white marble columns made up larger villas with gardens springing up everywhere. Other buildings seemed to go up forever with breaks of peach brick marking every story—people crammed together like chickpeas.

I couldn't walk without someone brushing near me. One nearly ran me over. I walked closer to the carriage and smacked against it with my full body at a sudden turn.

The collision made a sharp *thump,* and I fell to my rear.

The princess stuck her head out the carriage window and called the group to a stop. "Sister Anne? Are you all right? You look so pale."

I tried for a smile, but I could barely breathe. The princess and her men stared at me. Some of them glared. My legs curled toward my face, and I stayed on the ground. The princess was the last one I wanted to look the fool in front of. She was my rival for the prince's affection.

That she had a higher chance at it only made me hate her more.

My chest heaved. Black spots appeared across my vision, but I knew everyone on the street was staring along with the princess and her men. Stop panicking. Stop panicking. Just stop!

Why couldn't I stop?

Helene's hand went to her heart. Her voice seemed leagues away. "You're nervous! Why don't you come sit with me?"

In the carriage? I thought about refusing—I couldn't continue to look that weak in front of her—but I had to do something. And really, who would refuse? Panicked or calm, it would be a break from walking. I had

swallowed more than my fill of dirt. All the other handmaidens had ridden in the carriage at one point or another, leaving no real reason to be proud.

I nodded and stumbled to the open door with my chest still heaving.

The handmaiden already in the carriage glared as she gave up her seat for me.

Drops of sweat reformed on my brow as the door closed. It was hotter in here, but the door also muffled all the outside noise. I would take the heat for the silence; I took it like a shielding blanket during a winter storm.

I would spend the rest of my days in here if I could.

Like a seagull with its eyes covered, my heart started to forget the crowd outside. I took one slow breath and then another. Smiling, I looked over the mobile sitting room for the first time. The cushions and engraved wood were enough to marvel at even closed up tight.

As my breathing slowed, sounds from the other royal passenger filled in the space.

“You see, Anne? There is nothing to be worried about,” Helene said, her voice high and airy. “The palace is just a house. The prince is just a man. Barely a man.” She forced a laugh. “Did you hear he’s younger than me? I’m eighteen. He’ll turn sixteen before the wedding, so it’s only two or three years difference, but maybe that will help. He’s a boy like any other. Just a boy.” She chanted the words again. Her fingers went white on her handkerchief.

She was just as nervous as me, though it seemed for a very different reason.

Even when she stopped speaking, she hummed and took long, shallow breaths until the carriage rattled to a stop.

Were we there already? More muffled noises came from outside, and the door opened. I braced myself for the cacophony of the street, but it seemed farther away. The palace formed an irregular rectangle with square towers and wide windows with arches built into the limestone and marble. I turned at the familiar sound of the sea softly lapping the cliffs under the southern wall.

Part of me longed to jump into the surf and never look back, but I was also drawn to the line of armored men that had come to greet us. My heart jumped again, this time with excitement.

Would Erys be here?

I couldn’t pick him out of the crowd—all these men were too large and carried shields and spears I doubted Erys could even lift. Soldiers and guards, not princes. Using the princess as a body shield, I scanned the slew of faces to a middle-aged, clean-shaven man at the end.

A crown of laurels rested on his graying, dark curls.

Helene took another breath and stood. I crawled up after her to stand with the other girls. The carriage driver announced the princess’s lineage as the daughter of one of my mother’s cousins—the cousins who had assumed the Cypari throne in my mother’s absence.

The older man’s voice boomed in return. “Well met, Helene. You are welcome here. May I present Prince Erymanthus Apollos Augustus, my only son and heir?”

Helene bowed her head to the boy who came to greet her—Erys.

I blinked, startled that I hadn’t found him earlier, but there he was. His curly hair and olive skin were just the same. I even found the small scab on his forehead. They must have made him wear a *lot* of padding under his leather tunic to blend in with the soldiers so well.

And I was sure to blend in with the other handmaidens. Dirt covered me from the road.

Would Erys even notice me?

The prince held a more serious expression than he had on my island. “Princess Helene, I . . .” Erys looked right past his bride, right into my eyes. His hand froze near his chest, stopping him mid-salute, never giving me the chance to stew myself another vat of panic. In a moment, it seemed we were the only ones on the street, the only ones that mattered. “Ari?”

A thrill went down my spine. Silence filled the street for several breaths.

Helene jerked around, looking back and forth between us. “You know her?”

“Yes, I . . .” Erys jerked his eyes back to the crowd and stiffened his back. “She is your slave?”

Slave? I was a handmaiden—but maybe that was the same thing. I didn’t know if the other girls were free to go or not. Or if I was free to go, technically. I was fed, not paid, but that had been enough for me as our goals were aligned. Though, if I ever wanted to leave, nothing would keep me in this suffocating sea of endless sights and faces.

I was still the daughter of Miranda, Princess of the Deep.

Even Helene shook her head. “Sister Anne is a novice from the Amerstead Abbey; a freewoman who agreed to her position, though she might not tell you that. She has taken a vow of silence.”

Erys laughed, a sound so familiar and welcoming I heard waves hitting the sand and smelled salt in the air. His voice brought me home. “Why did you do that? Seems taking a vow of talking would have been better, more challenging for you.”

Helene gasped. “Do not mock her vow.”

I mocked my so-called vow. On the inside. My feet moved a few steps of their own accord, taking their place in line with the princess and closer to the prince.

“Erys, is there a problem?” came the booming voice of Erys’s father. The Sun King, Emperor of Solis. Though wrinkles weathered his olive skin, he had the large frame and decorative scars of a man from my storybook.

This man could very well have fought a lion and won.

I stopped in my tracks, wishing the princess was ahead of me again.

Erys shook his head. “Don’t worry. I said you would be safe here and I meant it.” He briefly turned to include his father and the rest of the men waiting. “Ari saved my life. She’s the young woman from the island that I told you of, Father.”

I smiled, relishing the murmured voices and the shock on the princess’s and all the handmaidens’ faces. Titera was wrong; Erys wanted me here. His kindness couldn’t have been an act, now or before. He was exactly as I remembered him.

He would throw out the usurper to my mother’s crown, and we would be wed at once.

He took my hand, meeting my eyes with earnestness. “I’m glad you came and that you’re a freewoman. I would have declared you one if you weren’t and risked upsetting my new bride.” He shared his smile with the young woman beside me.

I stiffened in his hand. His new bride? He still planned to marry Helene. How could he? Didn’t he just tell the whole court how much I still mattered to him? And why was he still smiling at the both of us like he hadn’t done a thing that could possibly upset me?

“So, do you want to be called Sister Anne or Princess Arianna?” He teased me with his eyes, prodding me to rise to his bait and yell.

It might have worked. If I had any way to break my vow, I certainly would. I would scream in his face for confusing me so. I would repeat every word I heard my mother speak over the years, cursing the character of men. Did he want me or not? How could he reject me and tease me and continue to smile and hold my hand all at the same time?

I opened my mouth, then closed it.

Helene recovered enough to speak for me again. The dreaded interloper had my prince and now she claimed to be my voice as well. “Her proper name is Anne, even if it was Ari before. Lots of people take on different names when they join the nunnery.”

“But she hasn’t really joined the nunnery, right?” Erys asked. “Why don’t we let her pick? She *is* a freewoman, and her name shouldn’t make any difference to anyone else.”

“Yes, but how? She won’t speak.”

I was sure my eyes showed the same question. It was hopeless, and really, I only had myself to blame. The prince’s marriage was arranged before he met me. I never gave him any hint that I wanted him to change it. I never declared my love for him before, and I couldn’t now. I couldn’t form the words to say I wanted to be anything but Anne the novice, Anne the handmaiden.

I wanted my name back almost as much as I wanted my voice. Even more.

He squeezed my hand and then let go as if sending another silent message. “Like this. Anne.” He wiggled his left fist. “Ari.” He wiggled the right.

My name! I grabbed his right arm and pulled Erys forward another step.

“Well, there’s one thing. She used to jump ten feet when I tried to touch her before.” He laughed as my face went warm at my own eagerness. “Ari it is.”

My heart soared. I had my name back. I *knew* I liked him. And perhaps, given time I could find a way to tell him that I liked him without my voice.

Loved him.

That was sure to make a difference.

Helene frowned at me as if reading all my scheming thoughts. “If you wanted to go by Ari, why didn’t you tell the nuns?”

I blinked and shook my head. There was a great deal I had wished to tell the nuns and never could.

Helene shifted back a step, recognizing the foolishness of her words. “I mean, before you took the vow. When you first came to the nunnery.” She looked from me back to Erys. “She wasn’t dumb before then, was she?”

Well, maybe that was a better question than the one she had before, but I still couldn’t answer it. Freewoman or not, I was still a mute handmaiden.

“Now, don’t mock her vow, Helene. I’m sure she is *very* serious about it.” Erys’s smile was for me, but when he held out his hand, it was for her.

I wanted his smile and his hand. How was I to claim ownership of both without speaking?

CHAPTER 13

The inside of the seaside palace seemed another city with its own gardens in the open atrium and separated buildings rising two or three stories. Marble columns, sphinxes, and statues that shared features with the prince and the emperor filled up every spare inch.

The princess got to walk with Erys to explore every piece of it.

I had to go with the other handmaidens to prepare the princess's rooms. But after hauling up the same trunks we had hauled all through the city, there wasn't much else to do. The house slaves at the palace had "prepared" the room, so I just had to unpack a few of the princess's items and listen to all the girls share gossip. The other handmaidens were anxious to know how to fit their routines to the schedule here. I couldn't have cared less.

I stared at the door knowing my future lay beyond it. My fate would be determined by the unknown words shared between my prince and the usurper of my mother's throne.

The princess finally returned with a dramatic sway to her step. She collapsed on a cushion on the ground, eating up the attention as the other handmaidens gathered around.

"Well, don't leave us in suspense, milady. What do you think of your betrothed?" the senior handmaiden asked.

Helene frowned down at her hands, thoughtful before forming the words. "He's quiet."

Quiet? I had been waiting for something profound to help me gauge how much of a challenge their relationship would be, but she couldn't be talking about Erys at all. Did she walk with the right prince or follow another man on accident?

“But I think he might be sweet.”

Well, of course he was. I waited for Helene to reveal anything else, but she didn’t. Was that really all she had gotten out of the hour-long interlude I had missed out on?

Either way, I was soon called on to perform my duties as a proper handmaiden—helping the princess take a bath and then waiting through the line of handmaidens before washing up myself. The water was brought into the bathing room by a series of pipes—aqueducts—but still seemed little better than a pool of mud when it reached my turn.

As a newly confirmed freewoman, I might have been able to ask for some deference and better treatment, but as a mute I couldn’t ask for anything at all.

Of all the rotten luck. Though I had a run of sisters, I never thought much of how it was to compete for male attention. My mother’s words came taunting, laughing in my head.

Men only cared for looks.

I had doubted my mother’s words before, but without my voice, what other measurement could I expect Erys to go by? Any man—or any *person*—would want to be in the company of the girl who smelled the best, the one who could wear finer clothes and keep her hair free from dirt.

Not to mention that the two or three summers Helene had on Erys, she also had on me. I had some curves, but she was a full woman, and I looked like a skinny twig beside her.

I still did the best I could and just finished when a knock sounded on the door.

“May I come in?”

It was the prince’s voice. All the handmaidens instantly started giggling.

Helene waved us back and ran her hands down her stola. “Yes.”

The door opened. Erys hit his chest and bowed. “There is a banquet. I am to escort you downstairs.” He turned and smiled over at me. “And you are coming too, Ari? All the freemen and women of the palace will be there.”

I smiled back and some warmth filled my breast, chasing away any lingering doubts. I was just as good as any other princess and I was invited too.

But he offered his hand to Helene again even while talking to me. “And Father asked if he could thank you publicly for your services to Solis. I’m

his only heir, you see. People notice if I go missing.” He winked.

Heat brushed my cheeks as I remembered our parting on the beach, when I said he might be sold to a ship captain. No wonder he thought me so ignorant—there was no chance of anything like that happening. His face was everywhere, even idolized statues that only left a fig leaf to the imagination. Everyone knew him. It was one thing to know I was born royal; it was another to have a whole empire acknowledge it. He had a whole palace watching him, but he didn’t quiver under anyone’s gaze. He carried his small frame with such confidence now that if I hadn’t seen him as the floundering, washed-up boy on my island, I would have feared him just as much as any other man.

If he knew I loved him, and he loved me too, would that truly be enough for him to denounce any vow he made to the usurper of my mother’s throne? Any vow that was made for him?

I hoped so. Finding a way to silently declare my love and be sure the prince shared it seemed high enough of a challenge with Helene around.

Erys bowed for us to walk in front of him. I glided out first then froze when I saw the dark silhouette of another man in the hallway. I opened my mouth, and nothing came out. What was Naman doing here?

He bowed his head. “Welcome, Lady Arianna.”

Forget that. I grabbed the knife, still bound to my back, and swung my arm.

He caught my wrist and broke my knife from my hand without much effort. “Come now, do you really want to expose us both? There are several things I could say about you, and I promise he will only hear my side of the story.”

He knew I was mute. Well, I suppose that wasn’t a secret. Everyone in the palace was sure to know before the night was out.

Erys and Helene came out of the room after me, looking between us.

Naman had stowed my knife and moved his hand so it would look like our arms were only clasped in greeting. I let him do it. If he wasn’t going to give me away and I *couldn’t* give him away, I didn’t want to seem a fool in front of the prince—more than a fool who took some vow and refused to speak.

Erys smiled as he joined us. “Do you know Naman? From the ship? He’s one of the chief palace guards. Can you believe that he survived too?”

No. Nor could I believe that he was still here posing as the prince's friend or guard or whatever he was supposed to be. But I dropped my head and let the moment pass.

I would have to plan a way to expose Naman, something that couldn't be ignored or misinterpreted. Something that would not expose my own motives. Something that would allow me to speak my own truth—that I intended to be the bride and protector of the prince when my mother retook her throne. I would just have to hope that the reason Naman had sought our help in the first place was because he couldn't kill Erys in the palace unnoticed.

"Are you coming?" Erys reached for Helene again.

Looking from Naman to Helene for a moment, I couldn't decide who was the larger threat.

Mother would have to kill Naman for me when she came, but for that to happen, I had to win the heart of the prince and prepare the way for her coming. She had claimed that giving up my voice would help me in my task, but I had yet to see how. Even she would have approved of making the seemingly resurrected Naman dead again.

And where was that blasted imp when I needed her?

The banquet hall was full. It seemed all the people in the street had come into one room and now were yelling at each other. For once, I was glad for the excuse to hide behind the prince and princess as nothing but a handmaiden.

"There they are!" a large man shouted. He stood from the front table, and I recognized the gray-haired, clean-shaven man as the emperor even without his armor or laurels.

Helene bobbed her head. "Honorable Augustus."

He chuckled, closing the distance between us in two large strides. "Save that for outside. This is to be a celebration! I'm going to be your dear old dad." He gave her a tight hug that might have broken her ribs. "Too bad really, but at least the grandkids will be lookers, and you'll know where to find me if the boy doesn't keep you happy." He swatted Helene's backside before she moved away.

Helene jumped, looking at Erys with both eyebrows raised.

“He’s joking. And he’s drunk.” The prince moved to shield Helene, leaving me exposed. The crowd of people in the room cast glances at us from long tables while Naman and the rest of the guards stayed by the doors like they were glad not to be included in the wild revelry.

“Of course I am.” The emperor waved to the goblets the men had been drinking without shame. “You left me alone with the wine. We’ve been waiting the feast so you could get your women.” He turned to Helene like sharing a secret—a loud secret everyone could hear. “He’s always been so runty. I thought he might end up too soft and sweet like his mother, but the boy still has excellent priorities, just like his dad. I’m so proud. And there is Ari!” the man shouted, undeterred.

I had two seconds to watch my death gallop toward me.

Thick arms squeezed and lifted me upward. I was in the air, spinning to a blur of color and sound. I didn’t have my knife anymore! My mouth opened in a silent scream. My thoughts rolled like thunder. I was going to die. I was going to die. I was going to—

“Father! No.”

I came down with a plop. But I still heard thunder. As my breath lightened, I noticed others looking to the windows, peering at a few clouds that had formed in the formerly clear sky.

“I was just making the girl feel welcome.” The man’s voice boomed in my still ringing head. If by welcome he meant for me to feel as though I would be happy to leap through the open window and retreat with the sudden gale to escape, he had done that.

Erys pushed his father aside and hovered over me. I tried to focus on the concern in his rich brown eyes. “Are you all right?”

I didn’t know. The room was still spinning, the air much too thick.

“I swear, he’s loud, but he’s not going to hurt you. He’s been stressed, but now that everything is going through with the wedding, and the war is ending—he’s celebrating. We all are.”

“Yes,” Helene said. “Do you think we could . . . bring it down a bit? For Ari’s sake? I don’t think she is used to so many people.” She was using me as an excuse and shield again, just as much as I used her. She had to hate the emperor’s crudeness as much as I did, but it didn’t matter.

I needed it to stop no matter how it was achieved.

“Right.” The emperor nodded with a sigh. “Sorry. I forgot what it was like having real ladies in the court.” He turned. “Where are the mistrals? The servers? We’ll clear out the fat and make this a proper banquet.” He clapped his hands, and the slaves appeared to fulfill his request.

I watched the emperor strut around, repeating Erys’s words in my head just to get my heart to stop beating so hard. The emperor was just a man. He was just loud. He was just like the priest’s boarhound who licked, jumped on, and even humped the leg of whomever he saw but could be corrected with one sharp look.

And really, it seemed to be true. The emperor slapped men’s shoulders, and his voice stayed the same volume as a thunderstorm, but he was smiling and laughing the whole time. And most people smiled with him as he reordered the feast.

Under a mosaic of a nearly nude man spearing a manticore, the main table stretched across the front of the room. The middle part jutted closer to the wall, making another head where the emperor sat. Erys went to his father’s side, and the princess next to the prince, but I had no idea where I was supposed to be.

“Come and sit by me, Ari.” The emperor pulled out the chair on his left side. “Erys can’t keep both of you to himself all night.”

I hesitated, but only for a moment. Even if it did put me next to that giant of a man, it also put me across from the prince, a better seat than behind the princess’s skirt if I wanted Erys to see me.

The emperor raised his goblet and winked as I sat down. He introduced a few of the palace senators and magi at the table, then waved me closer. “So, how did you pull my son from the sea? Don’t tell me the Galathians returned me with less of a man than I left them.”

Erys shook his head. “She can’t speak, Father. I told you.”

So? I couldn’t speak, but it should be easy enough to see what had happened. They had to all know we were on the ship together. I reached past my empty plate and grabbed Erys’s arm, yanking it across the tabletop like I had when he was falling off the board.

That was what I had done to save the unconscious prince and all there was to it.

The emperor frowned at the movement before he laughed, turning back to his son and shielding his mouth with his drink. “I do believe she is challenging you.”

I blinked and looked at my arm again. I suppose it *could* look like that—like I was attempting to wrestle arms over the table. Along with asking how I had saved Erys, the emperor had implied that I might be stronger than his son. They thought I was trying to prove it.

The emperor slapped Erys on the back. “Have at it. Formal banquet or not, the food isn’t out yet and we could use some entertainment.”

Helene’s chin rose. “Ari wouldn’t want to be a part of something so undignified.”

Arm wrestling? I could arm wrestle. I didn’t need the princess to defend me; I wanted to do something to show I had my own mind. She couldn’t be my voice in everything.

I ground my teeth and pushed at Erys’s hand to show my determination.

Erys laughed, and I was certain I had made the right choice. He might not be as brash as his father, but he wanted to laugh. He wanted to play. He didn’t want some sour, formal princess hanging about his neck like an anchor. He wanted me.

The emperor waved his arms to call in the rest of the table to watch.

I felt their eyes and heard their shouts but focused solely on the prince’s eyes. My muscles hurtled into action. I pushed and strained. Our hands wavered back and forth over the table in a way that seemed too regular to be natural. My eyes narrowed at Erys.

He smiled. He had to be controlling our movements, pushing and retreating on purpose. The prince was toying with me, playing for the crowd, and now I had to win.

I reached up my other hand and slammed down his hand in one deft blow.

Erys and his father mirrored each other, both banging the table in unrestrained laughter. “Cheating viper!”

Not really. I had used both hands to pull Erys from the sea.

Someone cheered, and another man slapped my shoulder.

My heart sped from my chest. As I jerked around, the chair dropped and hit the ground with an answering thunderclap from outside.

An awkward silence fell for one beat, but then the emperor and several of the other men laughed. Erys reached his hand across the table again. “Hey, Ari. It’s all right. Everyone loved it.”

I knew that, even before he said the words and I got to stare into the depths of his brown eyes, but my body still didn’t. It reflexively wanted to

hide from the men even when they were smiling.

I nodded, trying to right my chair and slow my breath.

Really, despite my fumbling at the end, wrestling the prince had been a sound victory. I had to do something to recover my grit, but even if I were strong enough to beat the prince without cheating—without keeping it a game—Erys might have been embarrassed in front of his father, which wasn't what I wanted either.

I wanted him to love me and I was certain to be well on my way.

"You have to get that girl talking," the emperor said. "She would entertain us all for weeks."

Helene was standing, also leaning in over the table after I had stumbled. She looked down at the emperor and the prince with a new fire in her eyes. "You shouldn't make a mockery of Ari."

Erys shook his head. "We weren't. She was having fun."

"You pressured her into it! You saw how nervous she was," Helene said before I could even try to nod and agree with Erys. "She is a shy and delicate creature with a sacred oath or a disability. She shouldn't have to be your fool."

They both were frowning at each other now—not even looking at me.

Erys pulled back his hand and mumbled into his plate, giving up. "Sorry, Ari. I thought you were having fun." He looked so young beside her, even when she sat down.

Would the men still laugh if I tore out all her hair?

My family hardly ever killed girls—*deliberately*—but maybe I would, once we had taken back the empire.

"Look! Food!" The emperor called in the distraction with all the grace of a beached seal, pointing as the slaves carried in a new table dressed with roasted boar. Then the man continued to fill the silent, awkward space by talking to the servers, praising them, and teasing them in the same breath. He ravished the young girls with the same attention he had given Helene, but they giggled and pranced around with wide smiles and tilted hips as if it were a game of cat and mouse that they all enjoyed. Something that ended in shared laughter instead of the cat violently pouncing or the so-called mouse biting back, let alone taking the man's head off like my mother would.

A few of the girls even teased the emperor back, pretending to hide the wine or threatening to cut him off from pork if he didn't behave better.

They threatened to cut him off from other favors too, and he whined in an overdramatic stunt, but he didn't bother me or Helene again. He accepted the other girls' boundaries as they were voiced. Bending his large frame and larger voice to their smaller ones. Longing for their equal affection and approval. So much like Cerberus I could no longer separate them in my mind and almost felt the same fondness. *Almost.*

I wouldn't have joined in myself—even if I did have my voice—but I sat next to him and ate my meal without trembling my fingers, becoming more thoughtful. The man might still be a beast, but if the women here enjoyed and encouraged it, I couldn't put the blame on him alone.

I had made a few lists now of the people I wished to die with my mother's reign. Why did I never think of putting the emperor among them? Before Helene at least? I wasn't even inclined to correct the mistake now, though he would certainly make my mother's list without me. He was the Emperor of Solis—he looked and, in some ways, acted in the same crude and dominating fashion I had expected from the Emperor of Solis.

But if Mother killed him, I might be . . . sorry.

And what would Erys think? The prince didn't tease the female slaves, but things I knew and had grown to love about the prince now seemed nothing more than the slightly disordered reflection of all the men around him. The way he laughed, smiled. His endless cleverness and wit. Even the way he spoke and moved too quickly at times.

It had been so easy to picture us together and forget the rest of the world when we were alone on my island, but would he really like that? Even if he loved me?

His world was so much fuller than mine had ever been.

Though right now, Erys looked more uncomfortable with the princess than I was with his father. As promised, theirs was a proper banquet. An awful, formal banquet where the princess tied her napkin into knots, and Erys spilled his cup. She never relaxed her straight back and wary gaze, no matter how much Erys tried to shield and please her. He became much too quiet and dutiful in return. The princess had said the prince was quiet, and I finally believed it.

They both could faint at any moment.

Erys excused himself from the feast early. I didn’t know if he expected me to follow, but I didn’t want to stay in that room without him. I only hesitated when we reached the outer balcony and his shadowing guardsman turned to stare at me. But Erys smiled and waved me over at once.

“You found me. Well, come on.” He moved so I could stand beside him over the crashing waves. I searched the water, seeing a flash of color I thought might belong to a finned tail.

My heart soared then fell again, as steady as the waves on the sand. Thoughts of my sisters, my home, and my mission put me at rest and on guard again all at once.

I turned away, so I could only hear the water. Soak in the good and forget the rest.

Erys leaned against the banister with me, a more relaxed smile on his face. “I thought you would like it. It’s my favorite spot. I like the water and the quiet.”

I squinted back. I thought I loved the prince, but there were more layers to him than I had discovered in our previous meetings. He liked the quiet? Or maybe he just preferred it to the awful banquet. My eyes went back toward the continued but distant sounds of revelry.

“That was terrible, wasn’t it?” He sighed, like I had given him a full lecture on proper banquet behavior. “There’s just so much pressure. Helene and I have to find some way to get along, or the war between our people will never end. Promise me when you marry, you’ll do it for love.”

I intended to. Erys *had* to love me.

More war was coming. Nothing could stop that. Mother would kill as she always did. Erys and the rest of the providences had always been a target, but that wasn’t my fault. I had come here to save him, to shield us both from the coming storm by ingratiating myself to Mother and Valadern. I had done everything for Erys, and he was sure to see that. I could even try to save someone else for him if he wanted—not Helene and not the emperor since I knew how Mother would feel about that, but someone else. Just enough for him to see I loved him.

He gave me a wry smile. “We’ll find you a man like the ones in your book, some gentle giant who never yells. I could help you find one . . . you do want to get married, don’t you? Or are you really trying to be a sister? It’s fine if you are, but if you would like to stay here . . . or do something different . . .” He kept starting and stopping—waiting for me to speak, then

filling in the silence himself, never giving me a clear question I could answer with a movement of my head.

I even tried to open my mouth myself a few times, but it didn't help.

This would never work. I couldn't talk to him.

I stomped my foot, just to make a sound.

His eyes narrowed. "It isn't just a vow. Something happened after I left. I *knew* I shouldn't have." He reached for my hand. "Ari, look at me."

He stared at me, just as he had on the shore when I thought our hearts had become one.

"I know you can't tell me what happened, but I'm going to fix it. I promise. I'll find a way." He hugged me then, his lips brushing my forehead. "You're our little sister now, and you are going to love it here, just like I said."

He had no idea what he was talking about, but I believed him just the same.

CHAPTER 14

Erys came to the princess's room early the next morning, but he was calling for me. He opened the door without knocking, causing the other handmaidens to glare as they still hadn't gathered up all their night things. "Little sister!" he said without looking at them. He pushed another young man in front of him. "Look what I found for you! This is Jonas. He's been dumb for years, but he speaks. See?"

The new man seemed near the same age as the prince, but twice his size in the shoulders. His dark hair was trimmed short like the other guards. His fingers danced around in a purposeful pattern before he made the same salute all the armored men did.

I only wondered how Jonas became dumb for a second. Then I saw the notch of a thick white scar across his neck that his olive skin and thin beard couldn't hide.

He had been mute for *years*? He was a young man! Who would do that to a child?

The thought came back to me in all its absurdity. I knew several who would do that to a boy and worse. Child or not. It wouldn't even had been a question a month ago.

Erys looked between the two of us. "I thought—perhaps we could learn some signs together."

Helene smiled like Erys had made the gesture for her. "Oh, that would be so much fun! She always has such serious eyes. I wonder all the time what she must be thinking."

Helene did not want to know what I was thinking.

“Then come on. We’ll all learn.” Erys knelt on the floor, patting the spots next to him for us to follow. “So, what should we learn first? If she was thirsty, what would she do?”

Jonas put his thumb and forefinger close together forming an open circle then brought it to his mouth like a cup.

Erys made the sign. “Of course.”

Helene made the sign too.

Even Sister Leah and I had figured that one out. Same with the sign for hunger and tiredness and half a dozen other basic needs. “And her name?” Erys asked, finally regaining my interest.

Jonas tilted his head. He didn’t know what my name was. Did Erys even tell him? Or did the prince just drag Jonas up here at the crack of dawn without so much as a by your leave?

Erys was exactly like his father when he got excited—just as bull-headed. He was lucky Jonas wasn’t cursing *his* name in whatever silent language he knew.

I hit the prince’s shoulder. He was such a strange creature. A boy. But the word hardly held any horror when I thought of it now. It just made me laugh.

Like I knew Erys would laugh even before I thought to hit him for his impulsive crime.

“Oh, sorry, Jonas,” he said. “Her name is Ari. You don’t have a special sign for every name, do you?”

Jonas shook his fist in the same way anyone else would have shook their head “no.”

“Then what do you do?”

Jonas frowned, then made three different symbols with his hands.

Erys stared for a moment before catching on. “You’re spelling it out. You have an alphabet? For words that don’t have their own symbol?”

Jonas nodded his fist.

“Could we try to fit them with the written alphabet? It would help me keep track anyway. Can you write?”

Jonas shook his fist again, but Erys had already turned away like he expected that answer. He yelled for one of the guards at the door to fetch him a stylus and used it to write out three different symbols on a piece of stretched cloth.

Erys could write! Just like the priests!

“So this is A-R-I. And your symbols are . . .”

Jonas made them again with his hands—a fist in the air, then two fingers up with the first overlapping the second, and then just his pinky finger sticking up.

Erys turned back to me. “Got that? So no one calls you Sister Anne again?”

I nodded. I practiced spelling the three letters in the air while Erys wrote out a full line of symbols and the two boys argued—Erys talking and Jonas making faces and hand signs—until they seemed to agree that every sound was accounted for with both a sign and a written symbol.

Then Erys pushed the paper over so I could try writing them too.

Helene backed away, now horror-struck. “Are you sure she should be doing all of that?”

Why not? I had already taken the stylus. I might have been too nervous to learn with the priests in the monastery when everything was still too new, but I wasn’t going to let this chance slip by me again.

“A proper lady never reads or writes,” Helene said. “Writing is a way of keeping secrets, and a proper wife never keeps secrets from her husband.”

Erys couldn’t care about that. He wouldn’t have suggested it if he did.

He laughed. “Ari doesn’t have a husband yet, and when she does, they can send all their ‘secret messages’ to each other. Don’t you want to send secret messages to me?”

“Well, I . . .” Helene went red, too embarrassed and dim-witted to tease him back.

I wanted to laugh at the stupid woman, but Erys ducked his head, like he blamed himself for making her uncomfortable, and it was the too-formal banquet all over again.

The so-called princess wasn’t any competition at all. We would be rid of her once I could make my thoughts known. I went to work, ready to find my voice again.

After a few more moments, Erys excused himself and Jonas, saying he had to settle some things with the other guards, now that Jonas would be joining them. I worked long after they left, writing the symbols of the full alphabet

again and again. I was so lost to the exercise I didn't even notice the murmurs of the other handmaidens until one tipped over my ink.

The black smeared over the top of the page and on to the tile. "Oops. I'll get you a rag, or is the little princess too high and mighty to clean with the rest of us?" She smirked.

My face burned. I decided in a moment I didn't want to be called a princess by this woman.

Helene came from the window seat. "Ruth, why did you do that? Ari was working so hard."

The woman turned her back on me and bowed her head to Helene. "Pardon me, Your Ladyship. I just don't think it is fitting for her to be shirking her chores and making calf-eyes at your betrothed."

Had they figured it out already? All the other girls were casting resentful glances in my direction. It had only been a matter of time that they learned I had no intention of staying their underling. I stared them down, ready to face the conflict. Even if I lost, I would love to see what happened when Erys found out. He was the one who wanted me to learn to write and he would protect me from the likes of them. A man would protect me from a pack of women.

Helene shook her head. "Ari is friends with Prince Erymanthus. She saved his life, and I can do nothing but thank her and call her sister as he does. If she can learn how to speak with us, she will be sure to bless us with more of her talents in time." She ducked to the floor and righted the ink. "Keep working, Ari. If the girls need your help later, I'm sure they will find a kinder way to let you know."

I worked long into the night. Erys and Jonas came the next day and I instantly shot to my feet, showing off all my hard work. I had pages of the written alphabet and could sign them all.

Erys grinned at my untidy scrawl. "That's really good, Ari. Are you ready to learn some more?"

I nodded.

The boys were about to sit down when Helene came to my side with her own scroll. She offered it to the prince. "Would you look at mine too?"

Erys blinked, and then he smiled. His brown eyes lit up in the same way they did for me. “You were practicing?”

“Yes.” She bit her lip and twisted two fingers through her soft curls. “I mean, I don’t think I’ll ever be as good as Ari, but I wanted to try.” Three rows of looped writing filled one corner of her page. Her hair and stola were also prefect while I had neglected my own hygiene while writing.

“Thank you, Helene.” Erys bowed his head. “I would love to help you with that, and Jonas can show more signs to Ari?”

They all agreed while I stood with my mouth open. Helene couldn’t want to write, not after what she had said before. She was just trying to cut me off from the prince.

And it had worked so easily I wanted to scream. Couldn’t Erys see through such a thinly veiled ruse?

Jonas had to pull at my arm before I turned after him, but I really did want to learn more signs. I was sure to outlast and outperform Helene in no time if I kept working.

Jonas pointed around the room and gave everything around us their silent name with his hands. Chair. Bed. Book. I shaped the words in the air after him.

I signed a whole sentence about bugs being in the princess’s bed. Jonas grinned, and I quickly turned to show Erys.

He and the princess sat close together, leaning their backs against the foot of the princess’s bed. They were hardly writing or signing anything, but they were smiling and looking far too comfortable. Their faces and mouths much too close together as they formed each new word.

I wished I still had my knife, but Naman had stolen it.

The prince and princess seemed to be getting closer and closer until Erys straightened under my hard gaze, but the laughter didn’t leave his voice. “Little sister is watching.”

Yes, I was watching, and ready to punch Helene’s face in if she tried to kiss my prince.

“That’s right,” Helene said. “Come here, little sister. You and Jonas can sit with us.”

Little sister, this. Little sister, that. I didn’t blame Erys for coining the term—from my time with the nuns, I imagined. In fact, I liked it. But when Helene said it, like I was too young and stupid to be seen as a threat or an equal competitor—well, I would almost rather watch her kiss Erys. Almost.

He didn’t love Helene. He must be worried about the war again, the treaty their marriage was meant to resolve. I suppose that was a noble, prince-like thing to worry about. He wasn’t just a boy stranded on my island anymore.

I wasn’t a foundling, either. I was a princess, just as much as Helene. More than Helene, as my mother had the prior claim. Helene’s family only came to power after my mother vanished. I was the most powerful woman in the room and would be his redemption when my mother appeared to take back what was hers. But how could I get everyone here to see that?

Naman came in to switch places with one of the guards who had come in with the prince. Jonas made two signs, but I didn’t know what they were.

It seemed I had more learning to do.

CHAPTER 15

Pot. Stole. Flower. Through the next few days, it seemed we had mastered all the words and seen everything the palace had to offer. “We should get out,” Erys said to me. “I’ll show you the whole city, just like I promised.”

The whole city? Terror and excitement filled me at the thought. But before I could do anything but blink, Erys turned to Helene, inviting her as well. He even kissed her hand. No matter how much the city streets frightened me, letting Helene go with Erys alone was *not* an option.

If nothing else, I took my role as chaperone *very* seriously.

I stood at the gates of the palace as we prepared to leave, my fists clenched at my sides. My jaw tightened. Ready to do battle with all the rising voices of the outside world.

Jonas put his hand in a fist near his chin, the thumb and pinky finger extended, furrowing his brow. A sign for a question. “What’s wrong?”

Erys answered for me, speaking aloud. “She’s still not used to so many people. But it will be fine, little sister. You can ride on a litter with us.” The litter was a stretched couch with poles sticking out. Erys pointed to the strong men who would carry us, but they looked just as threatening as any man on the street.

Erys always thought he knew so much, but he knew nothing of my fears. Not really.

“Yes,” Helene agreed. “It will be just like when you rode in the carriage with me. You liked that, didn’t you?” Now I had the princess smiling much too wide to reassure me.

She couldn’t be braver than me. I got on the litter.

Once I settled in with the prince and princess, the strong men lifted us up. Jonas and a few other guards walked alongside. As the sounds of the city rose, I decided that riding on a litter was *not* at all like riding in a carriage. It jerked like a boat in a storm-tossed sea, and nothing was muffled. I could hear every sound. Smell every smell. I buried myself in Erys's shoulder.

Erys laughed. "Now, little sister, how are you going to see the city like that? The artisans are out today, and I know you'll want to see them."

I didn't know what an artisan was, and I didn't care.

A light hand brushed across my back. "It really is beautiful, Ari. I always admired the painting and poetry that came from Solis, even as a little girl." Helene's words were a reassurance for both me and Erys.

He wanted us to see the city, and I was disappointing him. Helene was pleasing him.

Erys wouldn't want me if I kept acting as a child, the little sister. My real sisters would never have tolerated my weakness. They would throw me to the open ocean and let me sink or swim. That was what I was used to, and that was how I would have to press on.

I finally turned my head. At first, all I saw was a blur of movement, but past the swarm of hands and feet, I found a man carving a statue. His powerful arms chipped the stone into the soft curves of a woman. His strength gave birth to something so beautiful that I looked and kept looking and even resented that the litter continued forward and that I had to move my eyes to the next sight.

I scooted to the edge of the couch, and Erys laughed. "You see? I knew you would like it."

I wasn't listening. Another man was painting. Another weaving. How could I see it all at once? And why must the litter move so fast?

It really was silly. I had my own two feet and never needed a herd of men to carry me around before. I leapt to the ground to get a closer look. It was time to sink or swim.

"Ari?" the prince called after me. I didn't care. "Look out!" he cried at the same time a goat herder almost struck me.

Jonas stood before the man like a sudden wall. The goat herder backed off, and Jonas waved to the prince to show that he had me, that I was safe. Erys instantly relaxed, and I found myself doing the same. I hadn't drowned. I had conquered this street, perhaps this whole city. I stayed in

Jonas's shadow and felt free to explore the statues and paintings and tapestries as I wished. I even smiled at the creators—the artisans and the blind poet telling a story to a crowd.

I loved the stories that seemed to match the ones in my secret book of pictures I left on my island. Mother had said my father was a poet. I hadn't thought much of it then, but now I kind of liked that idea. Those men weren't so large and didn't seem scary at all.

Eventually, Erys and even Helene joined me down on the street, but when the artisan stalls gave way to great columns of the temple district we had to stop. "Mostly, we worship the One God here, but we still pay respect to some of the older ones as saints," Erys explained. "It appeases the older, more superstitious among our subjects."

Like the sailors who believed in sirens? I didn't try to sign those words but let Erys read the irony of my raised eyebrow. He must have learned by now that there was more reason to respect the old gods than to appease the superstitious.

He shrugged. "I don't know what I believe anymore. Either way, I think it would be best if you stayed here with Jonas or went back to the palace. Father wanted to speak with us in Juno's shrine. She must bless our union, and only admits those of royal blood."

Juno or Hera was the Queen Goddess of Birth and Marriage. The legends were also full of her husband's infidelities, so it made sense that she might be more particular about handing out her blessings only to those with the proper birthright. I was a princess. I had royal blood, but as I watched the prince and princess test their blood on the knife of the priestess in front of one of the ordainment temples, I thought of Valadern's blood oaths. I hated being left behind, but if there were more bloody rituals and bloody old gods involved, I certainly didn't want to be part of it.

I still pouted about it until I realized that Jonas was stuck with me.

He shifted a foot, awkward under my somber gaze. "Do you want to go back to the palace with the other girls?" he asked with his hands. "The men will take you on the litter."

I answered with the signs he was teaching me, shaking one fist in the same way I might have shaken my head. "No." I stepped away from the litter and let Jonas send them away, leaving only himself to walk with me.

"The other girls are not nice to you." It was harder to tell with signs instead of speech, but it seemed that it wasn't a question and that he already

expected that might be the case. “The other guards are like that too. They don’t like having a new, crippled guard put above them. Still lots of superstitions and people who will throw out cripple babies for the priests and nuns of the One God to find.”

Perhaps that was why Sister Leah told the travelers passing through the convent that I had taken an oath. She had been trying to protect me.

If the guards were cruel to Jonas, that might even be my fault. I was the reason he had been dragged from whatever home or position he had to work at the palace instead. “Sorry you have to teach me.”

“Sorry?” He made the sign with his eyebrows raised, like he was confused. “Prince pays me. Lots. I teach hand-speak; he teaches me to write, and I practice the spear with other guards.” He swung his hands to mime the movement of a spear and looked so absurd I wanted to laugh.

I actually loved hand-speaking. The words were more direct and simple, but Jonas was always making over-the-top gestures so his meaning couldn’t be missed. It was like a dance or a play I got to watch or perform all the time. More effort, but more fun.

He straightened his back to salute. “Prince calls me ‘royal guard.’ High honor. I dug ditches before. It’s harder to find good work when you can’t talk. But I teach hand-speaking to other guards now too. Silent, secret.” He ducked his head like he was hiding himself. “Good for war.”

“How did he find you?” I signed back.

“Look lots?” Jonas shrugged. “He came late at night to talk to my family. Asked strange questions.”

“Strange questions?”

He frowned, and I knew he was slowing his movements and picking easier symbols so I would understand. “He wanted to know if I was nice to sisters, animals. Not want bad fighter. Not want bad temper. He said he would take me after Mother and sisters said I was nice. Said he would pay lots.”

“And did he?”

He smiled. “They bought a new house.”

Jonas gave it all to them? He *was* nice. Far nicer than I thought a boy could be before meeting Erys. And it had only taken Erys a single night to find him. Was it really so easy, dozens of kind men less than a stone’s throw away?

It seemed a larger wonder than anything else in this city, and that was saying something. We had left the temples and artisans, but there was still so much to see, even in the poorer districts. I paused at the next vendor who had plucked chickens hanging from the stall roof and live fish swimming in a barrel. The things they thought of here!

While I watched the fish swim, a voice rose up from the human swarm behind us.

“Jonas! There you are.” The woman shifted her food basket to sign the words. Her hands had the same fluid movement that Jonas’s did, but so bright and lively it seemed another language all its own. She moved her hips and put her whole body into it. If she wasn’t also speaking aloud, I might have missed the words.

“Sister.” Jonas signed the word to me before turning, but I almost didn’t need it. Their hair and eyes were the exact same shade of brown. “What’s wrong, Janessa?”

“Don’t you look all innocent with me.” Janessa pulled a young boy from behind her skirt that had to be her son, Jonas’s nephew. The boy smiled wide enough to show he was missing a tooth but said nothing to greet us. “Seth hasn’t spoken a word since you left,” she said “What did you do?”

Jonas’s eyebrows rose then he forced a somber expression. He poked the boy in the arm and in the belly, squinting and walking around Seth like the boy was a riddle to be solved. Then Jonas held up a finger to show he had an idea. He flared his fingers like spider legs and tickled the boy until Seth laughed—a high-pitched squeal that Jonas could never produce.

Seth clapped his hand over his mouth in horror. “No. No. I want to be like you.”

Jonas laughed then too, letting out a hoarse, raspy sound and scrunching his face. He continued to tickle and wrestle the young boy.

The woman covered her smile, trying for the mocking frown she had before. “You see? I knew it was your fault. They’re all running around using sticks as spears, thinking they have a chance at the royal army, and . . . who is this?” Her eyes found me behind her brother at last.

Jonas, with Seth still hanging around his shoulders, spelled out my name. “Ari.”

She sized me up with her eyes. “You’re Ari. The one the prince wanted Jonas to sign for?”

“Yes, I’m learning.” My signs were clumsy and slow, but I felt a strange desire to impress this woman, to prove the lessons had not been in vain. “Sorry to take Jonas, but he’s been very helpful. This is my first time seeing a city this large.” Any city of any size really.

Janessa laughed. “And he is showing you fish?” She reached for my arm, her excitement boiling over. “Come. If you want to see the city, you should see the gardens. The baths.”

Baths? I couldn’t even try to sign the word with my hand seized in the other woman’s grasp, and I looked back at Jonas warily, but his sister still answered.

“Must seem strange to a foreigner, but it really is the best place to be. We’ll go to the women’s side, and Jonas can watch Seth.”

Jonas shrugged and she pulled me deeper into the crowds without another word.

CHAPTER 16

Janessa was right. The bath house was a luxurious house of with four different pools and rooms of steam where everyone in the city seemed to come to relax and socialize. I sank my full body into the water and didn't try to sign a thing. Janessa had no trouble filling the silence. She spoke of her husband and their sons and even threw in a few stories about Jonas when he was small and chasing the goats on their old farm.

Those stories were my favorite.

The younger novices at the convent and handmaidens at the palace told the same kind of stories, giggling over the men of their past, sharing every touch and movement. The tales seemed as foreign as the stories in my secret book before, but now I believed every word.

Jonas would have been the sweetest, silliest goatherder there ever was, and his family would be filled with laughter, hugs, and soft kisses. Not the hungry sort of kiss I received from the awful fisherman, but the feather-breath, warming touch I felt when Erys kissed my head and hand.

The kind of touch I longed to feel again.

When the sun was setting and we came out of the baths, Janessa pulled Seth from Jonas's ankles and I went back to Jonas. Janessa still spoke for several more minutes, telling Jonas he had to visit again soon. And to bring me. And to eat more. And on and on until Jonas started walking into the crowd, putting his hand to his ear to play deaf as well as dumb.

"Oh, you," she said, retreating with her son with peals of laughter.

Jonas turned back and tried to stop his smile. "Sorry about her," he signed.

“Sorry?” I signed back in the same way he had before. “I loved her. And Seth. Is your whole family like that?” A part of me was even jealous, though I had a whole heard of older sisters myself.

“Pretty much. My sisters are older. They all think they’re my mother since . . .” His hand brushed his neck before he seemed to change his mind. “Well, I imagine most older sisters are like that.”

I reached out, touching the line on his neck before making a proper sign. “How?”

He laughed in the same way I did—raising his chest without a sound. “No one asks that. They all want to know, but they never ask.”

Oh. Was it wrong to ask? But I still wanted to know.

He paused for a moment, as if unsure of what to sign. “Our farm was out of town. Alone. Men came at night. They wanted my mother and sisters. They killed my father. They thought they killed me too.” He touched his own neck. “They tied up the girls. They didn’t tie me; I played dead. They drank, slept. I got my mother and sisters. We ran to the city. Safe, but no farm. I started digging ditches instead.”

They tried to kill him. As a boy, his gender was less desirable.

Horrible, but my mother and sisters would have done the same in a raid. Leave the girls, kill the men. But Jonas was those girls’ protector. I didn’t doubt they loved him.

When Mother came to Solis, I would save Jonas. Erys liked him, so it would help to prove my love for the prince, but I also didn’t want to see Jonas hurt again.

Jonas blinked as if calling himself back from a vision. “Then Prince come at night. Say ‘teach sister. Guard sister. Be nice.’ Then Prince . . .”

“What?” I made the gesture wide, hanging on his every movement.

“He got hard—scary. Said he would hang me from the wall or throw me to the lions if I hurt you. Only time I see him so harsh and serious.”

I had only seen it once as well. I pictured the hard eyes Erys had when he stabbed the sea monster.

“Are you really his sister?” Jonas asked.

“No.” But Erys loved me.

“I didn’t think so, but it doesn’t matter. It’s easy to be nice to you. My mother and sisters are safe in their big house; I’m learning to fight like a guard to stop other bad men. No more ditches. Not sorry. Happy.” He

smiled. A pure, simple joy that put me at ease faster than I had ever been with a man.

“Me too.” I made the sign for “happy” he just had—a hand in the air like a seal slapping the water. Perfect.

“See? You’re an easy job. I’ll do whatever you and Prince want.” He hit his chest, like swearing an oath. His face hardened a bit then, just like Erys and the sea monster.

A shudder shot through me like a reflex, but now with a sense of awe and longing.

Jonas wasn’t like Erys. He seemed . . . simpler. Easier to read. It seemed I could see his every thought on his face or his hands and never worry about what might be going on under the surface. His arms were wide, his step steady and sure. When I read the shape of his words, I imagined a voice lower and darker than Naman’s. I had gotten used to Erys’s way of weaving and rushing about, even shifting a few of my storybook ideals to fit my flesh and blood prince, but Jonas had seemed perfectly safe from the beginning. He was steady and solid, comforting and kind. Everything I had seen and wanted while reading of princes in my storybook.

To be with a man, see his strength, and still feel at ease—I didn’t know how to describe it. But I liked it.

I liked it a lot.

Guilt passed through me. I was in love with the prince. I loved him still. Finding another kind male, feeling the spark of the same emotions, confused me.

Maybe I should have expected this. Of course it would be different now with more men than just the boy washed up on my island, but maybe it wasn’t even that. Perhaps I only felt this way again because I knew the trouble Erys went through to find a good teacher for me.

Then everything came crashing back into focus when Jonas signed another question. “How did you lose your voice?”

My mouth opened. My hands fell. I should have expected that too. He had just shared his story; now he wanted me to share mine. I frowned like I didn’t understand or know the signs I would need to answer. It was almost true. It was still much easier to read Jonas’s signs than to pick my own out of the air, but that could only last so long.

Erys wouldn’t hold off from asking much longer either.

Jonas shrugged. “You not have to tell me.”

I saw the words form and I hated them. I wished I had a story I could share and continue to bond with him, but there was nothing I could say, nothing I could sign. All the merriment was gone, and we walked back to the palace with the formality of a lady and her guard.

Erys found me in the palace, eager to make up with me after leaving me for the temples. He looked at me with wide puppy-dog eyes. “It wasn’t so bad being with Jonas, was it?”

I shook my head, wishing I could sign more to say how much I loved it and how badly I had bungled everything. How I longed for the prince’s touch and then Jonas all at once. Even though that part of my confusion involved Erys himself, I was certain he would understand if only I could put everything in my head into proper words. But the signs I learned could only do so much.

I let out a silent sigh.

“It’s all right,” Erys said, like he thought his absence was still the only thing upsetting me. “We’ll spend the rest of the night together.”

“Together” meant we would be eating dinner with the princess and the emperor, but it was as I expected, and I soon lost myself to their usual conversations and merriment. After the food was cleared, we played a new game with stones moving across a checkered board that I soon became the master of, winning coins from both the prince and the emperor. And when Erys moved to sit with the stupid, proper princess who refused to play, Jonas sat across from me to take his place.

His smile said he had forgiven me for my previous blunder. “I know how you lost your voice,” he signed.

He was still smiling, but my breath hitched. What could he have possibly learned?

“You earned your keep at the local tavern. You won so much of their gold and told so many fantastical stories, that some brigand cornered you and cut your tongue out.”

He had to be joking. He was.

I scrunched my face and stuck my perfectly formed tongue out at him.

Jonas tried to look disappointed, but he was smiling too much. “Seems I will have to guess again.” He signed to the board. “Are you going to play?”

I would enjoy that very much. I took my turn, and it seemed at that moment, I loved everything in this city. I loved Erys. I loved Jonas. I even had learned to tolerate the emperor and Helene from a distance. But when Naman joined some of the other guards behind us, Jonas made the same signs he had when seeing Naman before, except this time I recognized them.

“Bad man.”

CHAPTER 17

That night, Naman was one of the guards standing outside of the princess's room. I *knew* he was out there, and it drove me into a frenzy. After the other girls and I had helped the princess to bed and lay down on the floor mats ourselves, I tossed and fidgeted until I couldn't stand it anymore.

I rose from my mat and slipped out the door.

The two guards rolled dice between them with their spears resting against the wall. They instantly straightened when I appeared. The guard with Naman hit his chest and bowed his head. "Do you need something? Or does the princess need something?"

Naman gave me a knowing smile. "The princess doesn't know you left. You want to go see the prince, don't you?"

What? Why would I want to see the prince so late at night?

The men laughed, and my confusion vanished. They thought I was just like the traitor handmaiden from my mother's story who slept with her betrothed. Naman was *telling* them I was. And without Erys or Jonas or even Helene here, none of the guards would understand if I claimed my innocence through signing.

My fists tightened as my face burned in rage. I would never sell myself so cheaply, and if I had my knife back, I would carve them up for saying so.

I was a princess, and I would be Erys's sole wife and lover or nothing at all.

"Don't worry." Naman's smile mocked me even as he inclined his head. "It isn't a secret that you fancy each other, but it wouldn't be our business to tell the princess that. In fact, if the prince called for you, it would be our

hides if we delayed you. Come with me, and I'll take you to him." He took his spear and walked down the hall to turn a corner, leaving me with the other guard.

I remained there in shock of his words, but the other guard was looking at me with the same smug eyes. Even if I could speak, there was nothing I could do to change his opinion of my foolishness. I clenched my fists and went after Naman in a silent fury—not because he told me to, but because I wanted to try my best to beat him senseless.

I wanted to confront Naman alone, and this seemed like my best chance.

I turned the same corner Naman had but was met by a winged creature. The imp. Lilthe made my voice firm as she looked down on me from the air. "Where have you been?"

Where had I been? *She* threw me at a vile man and abandoned me.

She landed on an empty torch bracket with a shrug of her wings. "You had to know what men were like before you tossed your family away for one. I held the man while you ran, but then you entered that . . . that . . ."

Abbey? Was it so hard to say the word? Lilthe might have stopped the fisherman. There was no other explanation for the way the thunder appeared at just the right time. But I had to learn to be human all on my own.

"Not the kind of human your mother wished you to be. Did you forget your mission?"

No. But I was making progress. I was in the palace now.

"As a chamber maid. In what world would a chamber maid marry the prince?"

I *was* a princess. I just had to make the others see it. Erys would marry me if I could make it acceptable to his father and the rest of his court.

If I could just prove myself to be a better princess than Helene.

"And how do you propose to do that?" She lowered her tail and I saw the shell necklace wrapped around it. She laughed. "Yes, I could speak for you now, but what would you say that they would believe?"

Probably nothing. My shoulders slumped, and I bit my lip. I had told Erys I was a princess before, and it hadn't changed anything. And now I would have to somehow explain how I went from no voice to a voice in a matter of moments.

My voice laughed at me through the imp. "I thought so. You are nothing without my help. While you were wasting time, I made an important

contact that will allow us to make our claim.”

How?

“Speak to him and see.” The imp spread her wings to point me the rest of the way down the hall.

Naman. He waited for me like he and the imp had planned this meeting from the first.

Well, I wasn’t about to back down. I retrieved the necklace and tied the broken cord around my neck. The imp twisted back into her shell and spoke for me as she had before.

“How are you still alive?” I had to ask, though part of me wanted to skip right to the part where we fought, and I exposed him. Working with him couldn’t be a real option no matter what Lilthe said.

He hit his chest. “The same way your witch of a mother lives. I offered the hearts of the rest of the crew and pledged myself to the sea. Now it answers me.”

“You’re a siren?” That didn’t seem right. I didn’t know men could make a pledge like that, but here he was.

“Not exactly, but I am stronger and can shout to control the water as they can,” he said. But we weren’t in the water now. My family was weaker on land, and he would be too.

He could still die just like any other man.

“I can tell Erys all about you.” I couldn’t before, but with Lilthe’s help I could now. Even without her help if I kept learning signs and symbols for speech. And maybe if I did another heroic deed to prove myself, they would all believe I was a princess.

Maybe killing Naman after exposing him would be enough.

Naman shrugged. “Why don’t I tell him myself? You are the lost heir of Princess Miranda and have a higher claim for his hand than Princess Helene.”

I stared. “Why would you do that?”

“So you can marry the prince, of course,” he said, and I felt his smugness. “I told you from the beginning: I wanted the prince killed to prevent him from marrying Princess Helene. If he marries you and your family wrecks the providence, then I still will have achieved my goal.”

“And why don’t you want him to marry Helene?”

“Do you care? You’ll get your prince with my help.”

He was so certain he had me. I hated him to be right, but what else could I do?

He turned away. “There is a test of blood. A spell. Could you pass it? You are the daughter of Miranda?”

Of course I was.

CHAPTER 18

The next day, I watched the sun climb higher in the sky with a sigh. I hated days when the prince didn't visit. The princess didn't seem to know what to do with herself, either. She combed my hair and tied it up in different patterns like I was a dress-up doll.

Finally, Helene handed me the mirror so I could see the long braids piled on my head. "Here, do you like it?"

Sure. It was fine. I thought the words but remained silent. I had my shell necklace with Lilthe now, but I didn't ask her to speak for me since I still didn't know how to explain how I suddenly regained my voice.

"When will the boys be here?" I asked with my hands. I craved their company more than the women. Even when they weren't trying to be spiteful, the women so often gossiped—conversations I couldn't fully participate in. Men didn't care that I was silent. Not that they ignored me, on the contrary, men always seemed to watch and smile when I or one of the other young maids were around. I'm sure my mother would have found some way to assign the looks ill-intent, but there was something about the extra attention I craved—a new hunger I didn't know I had.

Helene laughed. "Oh, they wouldn't come today. The games are today."

They were playing games without us? I thought of the board with stones.

The princess had refused to play.

"We should be able to find something to do here." She turned to the other handmaidens scattered about the room. "What should we try? Singing? Needle point?"

The girls called out their suggestions, but I moved to the back wall and slipped through the door, ready to find the boys on my own. Their games had to be more exciting than anything the so-called princess could dream of.

I didn’t need instructions to find the games. All I had to do was follow the thick crowd to the large marble gates of the colosseum. I smiled as I moved among the men, no longer the frightened creature I had been when I first arrived at the city. Holding my chin up high, it seemed I had always belonged there. No one challenged me. Some guards I recognized from the palace even helped me climb the stands to find the royal family, like they thought I had been summoned.

But the prince shook his head when he saw me. “Ari, you shouldn’t be here.”

I frowned. Sure, Erys took Helene’s arm instead of mine when we walked, but he had never acted unhappy to see me before.

His father, standing next to him and some other men from the palace, also seemed surprised to see such a somber expression on his son’s face. He slapped the prince on the back. “Come on, Erys. She’s no mere slip of a girl. She is a warrior who pulled you from the depths of the sea. Perhaps she would like to see that there is real strength in Solis.” He pumped his fist in the air and leaned over the guardrail to point toward the center of the arena.

Following the length of the emperor’s arm, I looked down from the elevated stand to the field of dirt several stories below. Bare-chested men, covered with mud, stood in a line. They stretched and strained their muscles, grunting as each threw long spears in turn.

The crowd of men around us roared with dismay or pleasure with each throw.

Erys looked back and forth between us, torn. “Are you sure you want to see this, Ari?”

See what? Men throwing spears? They wheeled out a large harpoon to demonstrate next. It wasn’t terribly exciting, but it wasn’t offensive. Were the other women so delicate that they couldn’t even stand to see the point of a blade?

I smiled and pushed my way past the palace senators and magi to stand in between the prince and the emperor. I still didn't know the finer points of this exercise, but I happily raised my hand when the others cheered, savoring the warmth and power of the bodies around me.

Savoring every time Erys fidgeted, brushing my arm with no distraction from the princess.

While the harpoon fired its last rounds, all the bare-chested men cleared off the field except for two—selected by some lottery I couldn't understand. The men waved their spears to opposite sides of the roaring crowd, then faced each other, circling closer. And closer. They came within arm's reach of each other and neither threw their weapon this time. I bit my lip when the first man charged. The bare blade just missed the other's arm, but the watching crowd, including the emperor and his entourage, were still laughing and joking around me.

I jumped, then smiled when Erys grabbed for my hand. A tingling, thrilling sort of fear baited my breath. It had to be another choregraphed demonstration. Another mock battle.

The emperor even elbowed one of his men. "Two talents on the jumpy one," he said, betting on one of the fighters like they had on the game of stones. It was only a game.

The "jumpy" fighter pounced like a lion and time seemed to slow and quicken at the same time in a flurry of movement and sound. The blade struck. The man fell.

Blood mixed with the mud on the ground.

The laughter, the click of money, and the back-slapping revelry around me instantly became muffled as if I had dipped my head in a stream. Men on the sidelines came to carry out the still corpse on the ground. This wasn't just a mock battle. And they weren't done yet.

The next bare-chested man to join the fight was . . . Jonas?

I started after him in wide steps toward the railing. We were perched so high above the chasm that I didn't know what I planned on doing, but my heart pounded in my ears. My mouth opened in a silent scream. Thunder sounded. I couldn't let the fighting continue. I . . .

A man's arm came down in front of me.

"Control your woman." The emperor laughed and threw me to Erys like a sack of grain.

The prince put me down, but held on tight to my wrist, pulling me away. I had never felt so degraded, but it wasn't like I wanted to stay and see another death I couldn't control.

Erys pulled me toward the back steps, but we didn't go far, the press of the crowded colosseum too much. I still heard the shouts of the crowd, the grunts of the fighters. One of those distant sounds could be Jonas falling to the ground. I winced.

Erys forced his face into stone. "The women are not meant to watch."

How could *he* stand to watch? I reached for my necklace, and then dropped my hands again. Erys knew all the signs I did, and this was not the time to let an imp speak for me.

I tried for the first letter of Jonas's name, but I couldn't get my shaking fists to obey.

Erys was already trying to explain. "Jonas is a peasant, a common citizen. His family are farmers and shopkeepers. I can't keep promoting him just because I like him. The other men would never follow a leader like that; they would stab him from behind long before he reached the front. This is how he rises in the ranks. This is how he earns his honor."

His honor? Would Jonas's whole family of farmers and shopkeepers be able to live off Jonas's "honor" if he died, no longer able to provide for them? No longer able to tease Janessa and wrestle with Seth? No longer able to teach me and guard me and dance around when he spoke?

Erys turned his head with another shout from the crowd. He was allowing this to happen, but he was nervous. He didn't want Jonas to get hurt. I could tell. I remembered Jonas telling me that the other guards were sometimes resentful of the royal favoritism in the same way that the other handmaidens were. Was this really the only way?

"Father stops it before too many lives are lost," Erys said. "He doesn't want to quarter his guard."

I pulled at his arm and carved my words in the air with hands like daggers. "You do this when you are emperor?"

The answer should have been easy, but he hesitated. The hardness left his gaze as he slumped forward. "I don't know. Solis has stood for thousands of years, conquered several nations in blood. We are strong, but the people love us too. Every time we take in a new nation, we don't make them reject all their old ways. We add on what makes us stronger and become one. We took gods, arts, *everything*. You understand? In Solis, an

emperor does not always get his way. He must know what the people want and what they will allow. That is how an emperor *stays* emperor."

He put his arms on my shoulders, his eyes searching mine. "My mother died when I was young. I was raised by nuns of the One God before my father set me on the other mystics and scholars and put a spear in my hand. There are things I know of love and gentleness, but there is a long history of blood in our country. It is our strength. I cannot banish it all at once, nor would I."

Erys would let Jonas die, all for a game. Jonas would die because some impulsive prince had dragged him into a new world he might not be ready to face.

He would die because Erys fetched him for *me*.

"I trained with him. I found others to help—I promise I did all I could." The prince's words rose and broke like the tide. His arms fell around me.

I clung to him, but he held me just as hard. Either of us would collapse without the other. He kissed the top of my head again, but I barely felt it. I closed my eyes as I buried my head near his shoulder. The tears fell as I pictured a hundred deaths I never wanted to see and could never prevent. All the faceless sailors of my past now had a scar on their neck and Jonas's joy in their eyes before my sisters snuffed it out.

Would I ever find a place where all the killing would stop?

Would I ever be strong enough to stop it myself?

The sounds of the crowd changed. Something had happened. I turned and Erys climbed back up the stairs to a higher point on the stands. He exhaled. "It's all right. You can look."

I took Erys's hand, my knees still trembling.

Jonas's opponent was on the dirt. Jonas held the spear above the man's head, only putting the weapon away after the emperor's signal. A wave of a thumb had stopped a man's death.

Erys smiled and his hand brushed my shoulder. "Will you congratulate him, or shall I?"

Congratulate him? My feet were frozen, and I couldn't stop my silent tears.

Erys nodded. "Perhaps next time."

He climbed down the rest of the stairs and ran out into the arena for me, raising Jonas's hand to the roar of the crowd.

Jonas had won. He was safe. Erys pushed into Jonas with a yell. Jonas pushed back, now the playful, laughter-filled wrestling of two cubs. Heat and energy circulated from the men in the audience.

Erys was their prince, accepting a strong guard with the full approval of all those on the field. Earning a trust and camaraderie that I had to accept, but I was glad to be a woman in this world of men and never have to participate in an arena like this.

Next time I wouldn’t even watch.

CHAPTER 19

I left the colosseum, but I didn't want to go back to the palace. The smell of blood and sweat haunted my steps as I fled past the old temples, past all the empty artesian stands and shops.

The cobblestone morphed into dirt and sand under my feet. I was out of the city.

I reached the beach I had seen from the palace balcony and watched the sea, how it rose and fell. So long it had seemed repressive. Now I craved it. A weariness came through me, like I finally didn't have to be so on guard. I could surrender and be protected by the power of the sea.

Salt cleared out all my other senses. I welcomed the water on my toes. Holding onto my shell necklace, I willed it to send my essence through the foam and waves of the sea.

I didn't have to wait long before the water parted for a figure with green-tinted skin, dark tattoos, and light hair. Serena held up her arm in greeting. "Ari! You have been too long. We worried. Catra, Corva, and I—we all kept checking the beach hoping to see you."

So maybe I had seen one of them the other night. Serena wouldn't understand signing, but she already knew the secret of my stolen voice. I reached for my necklace, and instantly the imp formed the words I wanted to respond with. "I've been with Erys—the Sun Prince, I mean."

"Yes, I know, but . . ." Serena stood with her hair over her chest and the water still covering her bottom half. "You were so eager when Mother sent you here. And after you left, I found this in your garden." She threw a sack at my feet.

I opened it to find my secret book, the vellum protected from the water by sealskin.

My heart sank. There was nothing in the world that could explain that.

In the silence of my rising guilt, my sister's smile faded. Her gray eyes became cold and dark. "You've been staring at princes for years, have you? You want him. You love him."

"I never meant to!" Even though I could speak through Lilthe, my hands itched to make the signs and give the words new depth. "It is just, I always thought they would be beastly. That I would be able to kill one just so we could be a family again. But Erys . . ."

I shook my head. I had a tumble of emotions when I thought of Erys now. Affection. Excitement. Resentment. Fear. All jumbled up into one person who now seemed as much a part of me as my left hand. I could never do anything to hurt or betray him.

Even if we fought, I wanted to be with him more than I wanted an empty sea.

Serena looked through me with a stare that could pierce through stone. Serena wasn't like Janessa or any other human woman. She was my sister, but she seemed different now after I spent so long on land with other humans. I saw things that I hadn't noticed before. How still she was. How often she stared. So much like a predator watching for prey. Though Serena was the most mothering of my sisters, there was a hardness that made my insides shake. She was a being who couldn't accept any kind of weakness even in her sister.

My head held other images of her being full of warmth and laughter, but that was before she changed. Becoming a siren had changed so much more than her legs.

Even if she wanted to support me as her sister, she would never understand.

"Why did I have to meet him?" I cried out in defeat. "The twins didn't have to do this." Their men were brought to them and killed at the altar without discussion. They never spoke a word to them. They never heard them laugh or stared into their eyes and felt so safe and wanted that it seemed the world had gone still. They never fought or cried together. They never even knew their names.

The answer didn't come at once. "Mother . . . she didn't want to risk anything with the twins. She worried about them. Because of me." Serena

ducked her head like admitting some deep shame. “I loved a boy named Aides.”

She did?

“I met him before I changed. He was thrown from the deck in a squall and ended up on our island. I helped him get home.”

I wiped my eyes and smiled at the new but familiar story. “So, you do understand.”

“Yes, but Mother is right, you know.” Her chin rose and her words lost all feeling. “Aides didn’t love me at all. Prince Erymanthus is probably the same.”

“But Erys does love me! I know he does.”

Serena raised one eyebrow. “Then why is he marrying another woman?”

The words hit me like a sharp slap across my cheek. “It isn’t his fault. His father arranged it. But now that he loves me, he’ll-he’ll . . .” I still had no idea what he would do.

“All you ever needed to do was kill one boy, but you had to make Mother hungry for the throne. You made a mess for yourself, but you shouldn’t have to do this alone. You don’t have to marry him to give us access to the palace. We don’t need to enter the palace at all. Just lure that boy and a few of their other leaders to the sea, and we’ll be done with this.”

The finality of her words made my blood freeze. I had nearly reached the prince’s wedding and my mother’s deadline. I couldn’t stand for this to go on forever, but how could it possibly end?

“Ari!”

I turned. The prince and some of his guard had left the city gates after me. They were still scattered around the beach searching, but I stood frozen with dread. There was no time to hide or avoid some kind of conflict. A guard threw a spear when they saw Serena. It landed yards off its mark.

Her eyes narrowed into glowing slits. “Lure them out, Ari. You know you can.”

She fanned out her tail and dove into the water.

Erys kicked up the waves as he ran ankle-deep into the sea, holding a spear like he hoped to fish my sister out, even though she was sure to be long gone.

I reached for him, stilling his hand.

His arm went down, but his eyes raked over me as if looking for some injury. He pulled beeswax from his ears. “What were you doing? She is one

of the creatures who attacked our ship. She is a monster."

She was my sister, but I supposed that didn't exclude her from being a monster. Was she? She cared for me, and I cared for her, but I had seen her kill men for no more crime than their existence. Even the last man I saw her kill, the one with the knife, was really only trying to defend himself from the inevitable.

But killing was what sirens did. They had a different form, different appetites.

I couldn't blame my family for killing men any more than I could blame a shark for chasing a fish or myself for eating an animal. Perhaps the desire of a human to become a siren was the crime, more than anything else. Had Serena wanted to become a siren? Valadern demanded an offering of our own choice, but when the images of the twins' sacrifice came into my memory again, even that became less clear. They had been taught their whole life to hate and fear men. Their first victims were taken with my whole family watching. Refusing would not have been easy.

I doubted I would have refused if my choice had been exactly the same, if I hadn't had some space to save Erys without the eyes of my family watching. If I had not walked among other men. I gave in the moment my mother asked me to offer my own blood.

If my sisters were monsters, so was I. The men still had the right to hunt them to defend themselves, but I couldn't.

I turned and signed to Erys. "Are you angry with me?"

"Yes, I'm angry!" He hefted the spear, looking at once like a true prince. The commanding, idolized statues and pictures I had seen. "Ari, I don't care *how* mad you are at me; you're not allowed to run away like that. You still have to come home."

Home? I looked at him and then back at the shore. Being here had changed my thoughts so drastically. Whatever happened, I would never have the home I once did.

I had been chasing the prince for so long, but I couldn't imagine a scenario where I could actually win. If I gained his love, I would lose it when my mother came. He knew what they were now, and once he learned our full connection, he would never be happy with just some small token or a few lives saved. I wouldn't like it either. I couldn't stand the colosseum, and I never liked seeing my mother or sisters kill their victims, even when I didn't know their names.

If I didn’t gain his love . . . the prince and my family would still be at war. Always.

There would be no easy ending. Someday soon, I would have to make a real choice.

I couldn’t have one without losing the other.

His spear lowered and his voice softened. “You could have been hurt. You could have been killed. I was worried. Now come home.” He held out his hand, more feeling and heart in that one movement than Serena or the rest of my family ever achieved.

And while most of the guards seemed sternly indifferent, I quickly found Jonas in the same pack. Still bare-chested from the arena, all his tense muscles echoed the prince’s same look of love and fear. I loved my sister, but I knew what she was and what the men had risked by being here. They wanted so desperately to protect me from a creature who could kill them with one breath.

For now at least my choice was made.

I grabbed my book from the ground and followed my prince home.

CHAPTER 20

The next day was the prince's sixteenth birthday, and visitors filled the palace. Another feast had been prepared that rivaled the first. Dancers and mimes performed under the mosaic painting while everyone around me ate with smiles on their faces. My stomach soured with dread. I couldn't eat.

The three months I had been given were at an end, and I was out of time.

I had told my concerns to Lilthe in private, but all she said was that Naman had arranged everything, and I didn't need to worry. Not worry? Erys would be married tomorrow!

If I was going to do anything to stop the wedding, I had to do it now.

Erys looked almost as desperate as he spoke to Helene. She had refused all his games and didn't care for the players or any of the wilder form of entertainment that the men in Solis enjoyed. They couldn't seem to find any common ground at all. "So, what do you like to do in Cypari?"

Helene frowned, like she really hadn't thought of it before. "We sing."

"You do?" Erys looked surprised, but I wasn't. I had heard Helene hum when she was nervous and singing had always been Mother's gift, the gift of the Cypari royal family. A voice so sweet and powerful the elements eagerly answered her call. And while Cypari might have grown to shun the supernatural side of that power, it seemed some of that tradition had remained.

I wondered then, if I had my voice, if I could use that to prove my heritage. Lilthe said my voice had promise, but I never trained as a Cypari princess. Helene might still best me.

She bested me in everything. Erys seemed completely content to listen to her tells of concerts and group sings at the Cypari palace and offer her the chance to organize one here.

Something I wouldn't even be able to participate in now.

A guard stepped up from behind me. Jonas signed with his hands. "I know how you lost your voice. You were so sad you sang in the rain and caught a cold that could not be cured."

I tried to smile at his small jest, but it wasn't enough this time.

I was miserable and I might never sing again.

"No?" he signed. "I will try again, but you must have been a singer. An artist. I see it in your eyes, how intensely you look at the world."

My parents were singers and poets. Maybe Jonas was getting closer, but I didn't know how he would ever guess the truth.

"Why you so serious?" he asked next. "You let your food get cold."

I finally looked at the plate, filled with new delicacies I had never seen before. I pointed at a piece of meat. "What that?" I signed.

He stuck out his tongue then flapped his arms.

It was a tongue? A bird's tongue? I wasn't eating it. "You want it?"

He shook his fist. "No, I eat after you are done."

"I *am* done." I was past done. It was a bird's *tongue*.

I threw it toward him, and he caught it in his mouth.

My smile came more easily, and my heart lightened. Jonas was a better show than the players in front of us.

"Again," I signed. I picked up an olive, and he caught that too.

Erys turned from the princess, finally catching sight of the movement behind him. He grinned and picked out another olive from his bowl. "You're making it too easy for him." He waved Jonas away from the table and threw the olive like a discus.

The olive went wide. It flew past Jonas and kept rolling down the tile into the hall.

Erys laughed. "Oops."

I didn't smile, becoming as sour as the princess. Erys was playing as he always did, but I still didn't like it. I was sure Jonas was too loyal to his prince to protest a game made at his expense.

But Jonas rolled his eyes at both of us and never made a move toward the olive.

I laughed then. Looking between the two of them, I had a sudden picture of a large boarhound tolerating the hyper movements of an anxious lapdog.

No matter their rank, Jonas was the one in control.

“I’ll get it,” Erys said.

Then everyone’s eyes would be on us. Erys was still the prince and people noticed whenever he moved. I shook my head and stood up before he did, slipping past the open door and the other guards. I reached down to grab the olive when something seized my wrist.

I sucked in air but couldn’t scream. Lilthe wouldn’t even scream for me.

I felt Naman’s breath and heard his voice. “We’ll use this to test your blood. I had it blessed by a priestess of Juno and it will glow for royalty.” He showed me my old knife.

Test the blood? Naman was going to cut me open. I didn’t trust that man with a blade, no matter how he chose to wield it. My wordless, soundless cry shouldn’t have alerted anyone, but a spear blade ripped through Naman’s shoulder, and the bloodied man yelled for me.

All the motion around me blurred and came in fragmented pieces. I was free. The knife was on the ground. Naman was bleeding from his shoulder. Several people streamed into the hall, looking from my attacker to my defender.

Erys was the first to speak. “Jonas? What did you do?”

Jonas had followed me. Jonas had stabbed Naman. The blood trickled down Naman’s chest and dribbled over the knife. The blade glowed, proclaiming Naman to be of royalty as it should have done for me.

Jonas moved his spear under his armpit so he could answer Erys, hands moving so fast I barely caught the words. “I knew him. He’s a murderer. I should have told you, but I not sure it was the same man until he grabbed Ari. It has been nearly ten years.”

The emperor blinked at the blade, like he already knew what the glowing meant. “How?”

Naman, on the floor, grimaced and gave his steady answer. “I am Cypari and Solian. My mother was a slave, a handmaiden of the princess Miranda. She caught the eye of the Sun Prince.”

He was conceived the night Mother killed her prince and left the palace over sixty years ago. He was the right age, only strengthened by his recent bond with the sea.

The emperor nodded at him coolly. “You’re her son. His son.”

“No one knew,” Naman said. “No one wanted to know.”

But how did Jonas know? I looked at his scar again and slowly the pieces came together.

Naman said he made the bond after selling the hearts of his whole crew. His plans had become more elaborate and cruel, but he had always been a wild, murderous man who compelled others to follow him in his dark deeds. Ten years ago, he had killed Jonas’s father and that would have been enough to make him a proper candidate to bond with the God of the Deep.

The emperor smiled at Jonas. “Well, boy. You caught him. His blood is yours unless you would rather I throw him to the lions.”

Jonas put down his spear and walked away.

The emperor shrugged and glared down at Naman. “So, your death shall be without honor.”

They would throw him to the lions, have another game in their arena.

I watched the other guards drag Naman away with equal horror and satisfaction.

Erys shook his head. “But why did he want to use the knife on Ari?”

This was it, my final chance. I grabbed the knife from the ground, cleaning it of Naman’s blood and testing my own. Just because it had been Naman’s plan didn’t make it a bad one.

The blade glowed.

Erys looked at me. I smiled and made the sign, a line across my chest and down my side, like the corner of a square. I was a princess, just like I always told him.

I relished the understanding forming in his eyes. In everyone’s eyes. “She . . . she said she was the daughter of Miranda. She said she was a princess.”

I watched the whispers of the men around me. “If she is the heir of Miranda, then her claim would come before Helene’s.”

I smiled. Even Helene had come into the hall to witness her own downfall.

The emperor called for the senators and his magi. “We need to discuss this. What does this mean for our treaty with Cypari?”

I already knew what it meant. I was a princess in love with the prince, and I was going to be his queen.

CHAPTER 21

I followed Erys to the hallway and out to the balcony over the sea. The prince's guards wouldn't challenge me, but Erys didn't call me over or greet me as before.

I crept up to him, feeling like a silent intruder.

The waves rose and fell hundreds of feet below us. He didn't turn when I reached him, but he started to speak. "My grandfather came to rule because my great uncle—Naman's father—died before he married Princess Miranda. That makes Naman my cousin. In Cypari, they don't make any distinction, but in Solis, a bastard child isn't the same as a legal heir. The son of a slave remains a slave. He never could have claimed the empire. It must have driven him mad."

Did Erys really feel sorry for Naman? Was that why he left?

I reached out to touch him, but he moved away and finally turned around. "Ari, why did you use that dagger after Naman was taken away? Why was being seen as a princess so important to you? You know you are already like a sister to me."

A sister? The word took on another meaning than when he teased me with it before. He wasn't calling me a nun; he was calling me family in a far different way than I had intended.

Was that good or bad? I loved my sisters . . . some of the time.

"If Naman wanted to test your blood, it was likely an act of revenge," Erys said. His words were sharper, a steady stream of accusations. "Naman wanted to destroy the family and empire who rejected him. It still might work. Father might feel some responsibility to tell Cypari of your claim, but with the war and Miranda's disappearance the last time we tried for a

marriage alliance, they'll expect something to go wrong. They will see any other claim as a rejection of their current sovereigns—that we wish to conquer instead of merge our two cultures. The war will continue. Perhaps Naman hoped to continue in secret and take power in the chaos. Is this also what you wanted?"

Of course it wasn't. I didn't care about Cypari or Solis. I just wanted him. Didn't he want me too? He must. And though I still couldn't speak, I could find a way to show him.

I pushed against his shoulders and brushed my lips against his, offering all I had and more.

But he still didn't understand. He put his hands out. "What are you doing?"

I made the sign for love—a fist to the heart.

A dagger to my soul when he turned away.

"You . . ." He was surprised. How could he be surprised? "I-I care about you, Ari. You know I do. But . . . you have to understand. When I was born, my mother died. I've heard rumors of other women and other children hidden away since then, but true or not, my father still claims his heart belongs to my mother. He swore he would rather the empire be torn apart by his generals than claim another heir besides me. I suppose he sees an honor in that. Before him, before the new god, affairs like that weren't even hidden. The emperor *was* a god, and no one questioned his right to take what he wanted. The men of my family created men like Naman. I cannot be the same way. When I marry, I want it to be for the right reasons and to have no secrets."

It was what I wanted too. I knew now what my heart had already decided long ago. I would never betray him for my family. They could keep my voice. I could sign, and I could love my prince without it.

He shook his head, cycling through a few fumbled words before he found the ones he wanted. "I can't . . . I won't . . . I *do* love you, Ari, but love isn't the only thing at stake here. I made a promise to marry Helene. I promised to bring peace to both our nations, to stop the wars and start to repair the long history of blood you saw echoed in the colosseum. If I break any of those vows to be with you, I will not be caring for either of you. You understand?"

I didn't. But I knew what it meant when he reached for me, stopping his hand inches from my arm. He turned and walked away.

His guards followed after him, leaving me to my shame.

I gripped the banister, but I still couldn’t seem to hold the weight crashing down on me.

I couldn’t bear the doubting, cynical thoughts in my head telling me I should have seen this coming. That I should have known the prince would never give up everything he had to be with me. That I should have seen he could never love some scrawny, ignorant girl from the sea no matter what blood I held.

The imp uncoiled herself from my neck to add my voice to my inner refrain. “I told you this would happen. Everyone told you. You should have listened.”

Did she think that would be comforting? I didn’t want or need her in my head right now.

I took off the necklace and threw it out into the waves far below.

“Idiot girl. Now you won’t have your voice until I retrieve it.” She flew down toward the water, grumbling to herself about my ungrateful recklessness.

She didn’t understand. I didn’t want my voice. I didn’t want the sea.

I just wanted Erys, and he had picked Helene.

CHAPTER 22

Sunlight streamed through the window and burned my eyes. I rubbed my face, but it didn't help—not with my head pounding and tracks of dried tears smeared across my cheeks.

"Oh. Did you have trouble sleeping?" The senior handmaiden smirked.

She had done something.

I looked down on my mat. Sand covered the whole thing. I wasn't ignorant enough not to know that whoever put it there had ill-intent, but I couldn't say I had noticed. I was more used to sleeping in sand than sleeping on a floor mat and with everything else going on in my head—she was the least of my concerns.

It really was too bad women weren't more like men. If we were, the girl could challenge me directly, and in blood and sweat we would decide our rank. It seemed blissfully simple.

She pressed on with her nose still in the air. Her voice was sickeningly sweet. "I'm sorry. We thought you were up and already finished at the baths. You better get changed quick if you don't want to look a fright for the wedding."

Automatically, I looked to the princess. Now that the other girl had spoken their ill-intent aloud, I expected Helene to hurry to my rescue whether I actually needed it or not.

A dark line crossed her forehead—a small crease on her perfectly powdered face. "I suppose you have to come, don't you? Erys will expect it."

I frowned until the words settled. The other handmaidens I had come to expect, but this was the first time I had heard a hint of a harsh word from

the princess.

She didn’t want me to come? Of course she didn’t. I had called myself a princess to make a public play for the prince’s hand. There was no way for her to not know my intentions and no reason for her to like me at all.

And there was no reason for me to go either. I certainly didn’t want to see it.

Erys would marry her and there would be no place for me here.

“Anne!” It had been a long time since anyone had called me Anne, but I still turned at once to acknowledge Sister Leah. I would recognize her dark habit and the creases of her smile anywhere. Was she here for the wedding too? There were so many people filling up the palace’s courtyard. I would have already found some quiet place to be alone, but I was so much in my own head that I hadn’t even noticed them until Leah had called for my attention.

She pulled me into a hug, but I couldn’t even bring myself to return her smile. “Shouldn’t you be with the princess?”

I shrugged. I could sign all the words of the last few weeks, but there were so many, and Leah wouldn’t understand them anyway.

“Was she cruel to you?” Leah asked. “Must be nerves. It is her wedding day.”

Maybe. Or maybe she had finally realized that her betrothed loved me instead of her.

“Have you figured out the palace is not as pretty as it should be?”

Yes. I wasn’t going to marry a prince, and I couldn’t rejoin my family after my failure. Perhaps I should become Sister Anne again and swear them all off forever.

She squeezed my shoulder again in a partial hug before turning away. “We’ll talk about it afterward. I have to get on the ship with the priests, even if you don’t.”

A ship? Erys and Helene were going to get married on a ship?

My breath caught like I was already drowning. That was so dangerous. Didn’t Erys know? And my sisters, my mother . . . Lure them out, Serena had said; they would think I did it on purpose. They would be eager to help.

That boy was so stupid. And I would have to save him.

CHAPTER 23

Only a light rain fell as I stood with Sister Leah on the ship with the rest of the wedding party. For the first hour, it seemed I had put myself in misery for nothing.

Laughter spread through the ship's deck. Harps and lyres played. Helene sang to start the ceremony, and I had to admit, it was beautiful. Hauntingly, irritatingly beautiful. She glided down the aisle with a serene, winning smile. Erys wore his military garb in front of the priest.

Jonas stood near them as well, but I didn’t want to look at him. He was sure to try to make me laugh again with some new theory of how I lost my voice or other foolishness, and I was determined not to give in to him this time. I had every right to be miserable, today of all days.

I turned my head, but that just brought more of Leah's attention. “Have you seen a Solian wedding before?” Leah explained the rings, the veil, and a complex knot tied around Helene's waist that the groom was supposed to undo as part of the ceremony.

I didn't want to see Erys untying any of Helene's knots! I didn't even want to hear of it!

Leah shook her head. “I know this must be hard to see with your little fascination.”

Fascination? How could she say that was all it was? I loved him! I loved and hated him so much it seemed my chest would burst.

I had no way to explain that to Leah, but my emotions paraded themselves all over my face.

“Oh, dear. How on earth did you let your heart get so set on him, child? Didn't you know? An honorable prince always marries for the good of his

nation.” She put an arm around me.

Part of me wanted to push her away, and another part of me longed to go limp in her arms and cry and cry until I drowned the whole ship. If someone could lose their voice by crying in the rain, I would have done it more times than I could count today.

“Oh, to be so young again,” Leah said. “A heartbreak like this feels like the end of the world, but it really isn't. It's part of growing up. Our Lord must allow some trials to see what sort of soul we will have at the end of it.”

The last thing I wanted was to hear of another bloody god, but I had no voice to protest.

She continued. “Our god is not like the others. He does not take the blood of our enemies or any blood at all. To pay tribute to Him, we must sacrifice a part of ourselves and bear some pain as honorably as He did. Then He will raise us to be counted with his elect. You put your chin up, and show what kind of soul you have.”

I didn't know what sort of soul I had! I was the daughter of a siren, powerful women rejected by Leah’s One God, and I had failed even them. If I had a soul at all, it must be pitiful and small. I hadn't killed the man my family wanted, and now I couldn't even stand upright.

But then, I slowly noticed others could barely stand as well.

The rain fell harder. The ship rocked, waves crashing higher onto the ship’s hull. Even if I cared what vows Erys was promising to Helene, I couldn't hear them.

It was coming. A mere whisper on the breeze, different than the harps that had gone silent long ago. A stronger whistle as the wind picked up. Singing much more beautiful than Helene’s aria.

My sisters.

I knew they were coming, and I knew I had no real plan. I had to do something, but what? I had my knife from Naman belted to my back, but to even attempt to fight would be a betrayal to my family.

To not fight would be a betrayal to everyone else.

I pulled myself from Leah, but the priest had already stopped mid-word.

A wave came over the hull, soaking a run of feet. My first thought was to shield Leah, but it was only water. She wouldn't be in any direct danger from my sisters in any case. They might even save her and the rest of the women themselves if they were feeling generous.

The men would be the targets. The generals. The emperor. And the prince.

I had to stop it. To warn them at least. I ran to the front of the wedding party, but none of the men were moving toward their death. They didn't even seem to notice my silent attempt to get their attention as they pulled for their spears with the same practiced grace I had seen in the arena.

Even a larger spear mounted on the side of the ship.

They brought a harpoon? I didn't have to know about Solian weddings to know that monstrosity did not belong on a pleasure cruise. This wasn't the panicked response to the attack that had downed the prince's homecoming vessel. Some of the wedding party might be panicking, but the guards were gathering them below deck as quickly as their feet could carry them.

All the guards wore the wax in their ears, I realized. They were moving around the ship, steadying it by signaling each other with the signs Jonas must have taught them.

The harpoon went off. The large spear struck the water, and I heard the shriek of my twin sisters as they scattered in its wake.

The wind lost some of its force in their absence.

Could the men really hold my family off this way? Some of the guards seemed to think so. They cheered as the ship began to settle, like they thought I only had two sisters. And while the twins might be easily startled, the rest of my family would never give up that easily.

I looked to the other side of the ship just as the tattooed figure of another one of my sisters appeared, riding the waves. Behind the prince and behind Jonas. Vi was going to kill them both—with her fangs or her knife if her voice wouldn't penetrate. Vi would even kill a man without her fins, taking on her human form if they rained spears down on the water.

There wasn't time. Maybe there would have been some room to negotiate with or distract any of my other sisters, but not Vi. She never played, never hesitated. She fed, and she killed, never seeming to care if her men were smiling or screaming their heads off.

But even if I had my voice, a shout wouldn't work. Jonas wasn't looking in my direction and his ears were covered. Part of me still felt torn, unable to choose between the men and my sister, unable to fight, but this was Jonas. My Jonas. My hand found my knife and my mouth opened in reflex. Fear and uncertainty raged in my breast.

I threw the knife. A wild throw that didn’t hit anything but drew Jonas’s gaze.

Thunder rolled and lightning flashed behind Vi.

Jonas turned just as she reached for the prince. I had watched Jonas spare the man in the arena. I had watched him spare Naman. Somehow, I had come to regard him as a gentle giant, one incapable of any real violence. But I watched him stab my sister through the chest, knowing the blood she craved, and I was glad.

She fell back into the sea. The waves died down.

The blood in the water slowly brought the peace that the first strike of the harpoon had not.

Jonas looked at me, his spear bloody in his hand, but this time I didn't hesitate. I ran into his arms like I should have at the arena and with Naman. He lifted me onto his shoulder, and I felt his joy and the roar of the crowd as the storm died down. I responded with my own breath of relief.

But two faces in the crowd stopped my heart in one sudden blow. Helene had been screaming and crying when Erys found her. At first, his arms brought her to his chest, and he kissed her on the head, comforting her in the same way he might try to comfort me.

But then his lips traveled downward, toward her lips.

Jonas fumbled as my weight shifted and he put me down before I fell.

Erys was kissing Helene.

CHAPTER 24

I saw all the images again and again. The girl was stupid. The girl was weak. Her own wedding had been attacked, and all she had done was scream. I did everything for Erys, betrayed my own family, and he went to her and never looked for me once. Kissing her like he had done it before.

He wasn't just doing it for honor or country. He had actually grown to care for that stupid, useless girl without my notice. Maybe more than he cared about me.

Why couldn't he have told me that? Would it have made any difference? Made it hurt less?

I couldn't imagine it hurting more.

I sat on the shore outside the city. Serena and the twins watched me cry for a long time. The twins didn’t try to make any of their usual jests and all Serena said was, “I was right, wasn't I?”

I stared out into the sea. I didn't have the imp to use my voice and I couldn't sign to Serena, but of course she had been right. Chasing after a man had hurt me far more than I could possibly imagine. And there was nothing I could do to change it.

It didn't matter that my sisters had ruined their first opportunity. It didn't matter if their wedding happened on a ship or locked up safe in a church.

Erys would marry Helene and I would be all alone.

Serena took my hand, kneeling across from me with her human legs. “Mother put too much pressure on you. Forcing you into the human lands. Making you leap for their pleasure. Just take his heart and join us. Come home.”

Home? I thought I had a home with Erys, but maybe Serena was right again. Maybe they were the only home I had left. I didn't belong in the palace and a wretched, cursed soul like mine wouldn't belong in a convent. There was nothing left for me here.

Erys didn't love me, but was it fair to take his heart?

“Ari, Vi is dead,” Serena said. “You know that, right?”

Yes, I knew that. But who did they blame? Me or Jonas? Some other man?

Who should be blamed?

Serena pulled out my knife that must have fallen from the ship in the chaos. “Mother and Titera think you had something to do with that. The Solian ships have never been so organized before. I told them you never would have betrayed us, but you must prove it. Right now. Your knife was blessed by Hera and will glow for royal blood. His blood. Bring us the heart.”

She gave me my knife.

I stayed staring at the blade even after my sisters left. My eyes stung, but I wasn’t crying anymore. I wasn’t doing anything, not moving one step from the shore. Sand breezed over my feet and I imagined myself becoming buried there, one small grain at a time. Then I heard the flap of wings.

The imp. There she was. But her presence only annoyed me now. She had been no help at all! Not ever!

She smiled, landing on a bush with the necklace wrapped around her tail. “But you were doing so well. Having me there would only serve as a distraction.”

I hadn't been doing well. My sorrow had been wrung out of me, but something hot and burning took its place. Anger. After everything, how could I keep being thrust back into the same spot where I started?

I couldn't kill Erys. Even if he scorned me. I loved him.

“Did I ever say you had to?” Lilthe shrugged her wings. “Having a male heart, that was always an obsession of your mother's. We would be satisfied with any human heart at all, and it's not like they would be able to tell the difference once it was cut.”

Just like Valadern had accepted Naman's pledge, the pledge of a man.

But my family must already be suspicious of me trying something like that, now requiring that I use a knife that glowed for royalty. I couldn’t use a peasant’s heart.

“No, not a peasant. But, if you can't kill Erys, is there anyone else with royal blood you could kill? Anyone at all?”

My fingers tightened around the dagger's handle. I couldn't kill Erys.

But there was someone I would gladly kill in his place.

CHAPTER 25

The princess stood near a wide window, the sun shining brightly around her hair like a halo. She hummed softly to herself and I hated every note. She really only had herself to blame. She had invited me here. Her naïve good graces allowed me to prance past the guards without challenge, even with an imp's shell around my neck and a knife in my hand. She kept her back turned, even with my heart beating loud enough to rouse the dead from the depths of Hades and Valadern.

I tried to steel my grip and my focus. One stab, that was all it would take to break this fragile, useless girl. To carve her heart from her chest and watch her life blood stain the rug and tile flooring. I couldn't do it with Erys, but I could do it with her. I had to.

But all I did was stare until the princess finally turned.

She gasped, but in surprise, not a hint of horror or fear. "Oh, Ari. I was looking for you." She bowed her head, pointing to my book lying in her lap. "I'm sorry. I wanted to write something for Erys, as a wedding gift. I'm not very creative, so when I saw your book . . . It seemed a book of stories and poetry, and I thought it would help. I didn't even know it was yours until—There's a letter for you here. Did you know?" She picked up the vellum codex and held it open to the first printed page.

My grip loosened on the knife's hilt. I had wanted to kill her. She touched my book and she stole my prince. But just for a moment, I really wanted my book.

I had spent so long thinking that reading words was impossible, I had forgotten how my new silent way of speaking and hearing could be applied.

I had a letter written in my book and I wanted to read it.

My Dearest Ari,

If you are reading this, that means I have failed.

I am so sorry. I can only imagine what your life has been like. Know that I did my best to protect you, but your mother's moods are sudden and erratic. I don't think I can make her happy much longer. You are old enough now. I want to leave this dark island and take you with me. It is dangerous, but I have to try. I am leaving this book behind and will try to leave in the evening. If you are still on the island and I am gone, I hope that someday you can forgive me for my failure.

I loved you from the day you were born. You were always the brightest spot in my captivity. I hope that despite everything you will keep your sweet spirit and find a way to escape. The world is not as cold as your mother makes it appear. I want you to experience it all and will do my best to make that happen.

Your Loving Father,

Micah

Despite my new skill, it seemed I needed to reread each word a dozen times to understand their meaning. I touched the last words with my hand.

Micah.

My father.

I never knew his name, but the letter was written by my father the poet. The whole book was his. He had been a real man who claimed to love me, and my mother had killed him.

My mother killed my father.

I mean, I always knew she had, but I never knew that it was because he loved me.

I blinked and found the princess still staring. I regained my sharp grip on my knife, letting it come down at my side where anyone could see it.

Then the stupid princess finally looked afraid and let my book drop to the floor.

“You read this?” I signed with one hand. How could she have learned of my father's love before me? Couldn't I have one thing of my own?

My book had fallen open to the page of the woman standing torn between the two princes. For once, I saw myself in her majestic gaze.

I was ready to take on my own power and make my choice at last.

Helene ducked her head. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, but I'm glad I did. Ari, I'm so sorry."

Of course she was sorry now that she had won. She had won everything.

“I’m not stupid, I mean.” She shook her head and still looked down at her hands. Tears ran down her cheeks and it made no sense until I realized she wasn't crying for herself. She was crying for me. “Erys and I just met. If you had some prior connection . . . If you never had a real family before . . . If you *need* him, and if he loves you—well, I always knew it might happen. I wanted the fantasy, but it's not as bad as it could be, if we could still be friends.”

All I could do was stare. She thought I had been with Erys, and that I still would be after they married. It must have been the gossip of the palace for a long time now, but instead of raging, she was actually saying she would be all right with *sharing* him with me.

Why on earth would she ever do that? Faced with this kind of betrayal, my mother had killed her prince and cursed the rest. That's what anyone would do.

Well, maybe not everyone. Countless people told me over and over again that Erys was an honorable prince and would marry a stranger he didn't love if it would serve his country and prevent further war. He and Helene were exactly the same.

I saw her nervous fidgeting, her constant humming, her unwillingness to tease or smile too much in a new light. She wanted to be perfect. She wanted to be honorable. She was willing to sacrifice any desire she had to serve those around her. Faced with a disappointment like my mother had, she still had her righteous honor and her soul shone as bright as the ones Leah praised.

She was a better princess than I would ever be.

She hadn't seen Erys for who he was either. She had no idea what kind of man she had, the victory she had won. She didn't know, and part of me screamed she didn't deserve it.

But there was no way I could take it from her, even if I still wanted to. I wouldn't gain my fantasy by destroying hers. Erys wouldn't love me more

for doing this. He would mourn her, and I would carry the guilt until all I would have was death and an empty sea, just as my mother had.

My mother wasn’t the majestic woman from my storybook. Her fate wasn’t anything to praise or emulate. She ran from one god to bow at the feet of another, shirking her duty to fully embrace her dark powers. She never cared what happened to her people or her withered soul.

But Erys cared. Helene must too.

They both would do anything to bring peace to their providences . . . and Valadern would do anything for there to be war. Valadern would have blood. Endless blood. That was what this had been about from the beginning. Valadern had no loyalty to my mother or her cause. He swore with Naman and would swear with anyone who promised him more blood. He would always play what tools and pawns he had in an effort to obtain more and more.

I might not have been concerned with the fate of Cypari or Solis, but Valadern was. He knew, everyone knew, that a peaceful alliance between the countries, and that Erys, as the sole heir, having his own lawful heirs with Helene would be the best chance for the wars to end.

If Erys died or his marriage failed, it would end in more bloodshed as the generals, other men like Naman, would be set against each other to take what part of the empire they could.

I stood frozen, but the imp rose from my necklace.

“So, you figured it out? Took you long enough.” Lilthe dove at Helene to do what I could not.

The thunder rolled outside. Screams filled the room—from Helene when the imp appeared and from a handmaid who must have seen my hand with the knife.

But I didn't want the knife. I wanted to help Helene. I wanted to be loved by Erys, but if I couldn't have that, I just didn't want to be found at the end of my trial the same sort as my mother.

I just wanted the blood to end.

I dropped the knife and let it clank against the tile. Then I reached for the necklace and threw it down the same way. It cracked. I felt a tickle in the back of my throat, and Lilthe jerked at once, confirming the connection I had always suspected.

What would happen if I destroyed it? I lifted my foot. I might lose my voice forever, but it didn’t matter anymore. I was already twisted, broken. I

might never be a saint or a hero from a storybook, but I could make up for all the mistakes I made coming here in the first place.

I stomped once, and the imp shrieked. “You think you can win? Why do you think I was created? No one ever trusted you, not your mother, not Valadern. I have been his eyes, and if I die, he will know the cause. He will have blood, even if it is yours alone.”

I had no care for my blood anymore. Just my soul. I stomped down again, and my voice rang out in a heart-wrenching scream that seemed to shake the surrounding pillars.

The itch in my throat grew. Smoke rolled in, crowding my lungs.

I coughed and stomped and coughed again, but I couldn’t expel the force rushing through me like a lightning strike. The shell shattered with a force that threw me backward.

“Helene?” The handmaid ran around me to cling to the princess and they both looked at me with white, unharmed faces. A guard came in, but he didn't seem to know which direction to point his spear as I was on the floor and the knife lay between us.

“You're all right.” I breathed.

And Lilthe was nothing but a shell-less, voice-less slug.

Helene shook her head. “Ari, you're speaking.”

And she had been reading. She had learned. Maybe, one day, she and Erys would grow into a better match than I had ever seen.

“Ari, what is going on?”

“It's all right.” A calm entered me that seemed to even still the storm outside.

I saw the picture in my book, giving me the power to step beyond the two princes, the two godlike forces tugging at my heart, and make my own choice. Lilthe had been right. The war with my family wasn't over, but I would finish it on my own. My life might have been a foregone rite of blood and pain, but that would all end with me.

The rest of the world could have their fairy tale.

I had found my purpose and my true voice at last.

I ducked my head, retrieving my book and tucking the blade into my belt. “I'm going to take care of it. You won't have to worry about me again.”

I stood and walked past the guard, but something made me pause at the door.

“You should know,” I said without turning. My hand trembled, and I held the wall to steady myself. “Erys and I . . . we’re like brother and sister. I was never with him any other way, and I never will be. I just want you to promise me . . .” My words faltered, but this was all I wanted now.

My own voice. Peace in my own direction and peace for those I was leaving behind.

“You’re a wonderful princess. You might be all this city needs and more, but Erys is still a boy.” I let go of the wall and faced Helene. “Just promise me you’ll love him and laugh with him after I’m gone.”

CHAPTER 26

I walked out of the palace and out of the city, holding my book to my chest like a shield.

Serena and the twins waited near the shore. “Did you bring it?” Serena asked.

I nodded, but instead of a human heart, I held out the vellum codex, open to the first page as Helene had done. “Is this true?” But then I realized she wouldn't be able to read it. The written words had kept my father's letter secret and safe, but they needed to be spoken now.

I recited the most important bits. “My father wanted to take me from the island? He loved me?” I said and saw the words, but part of my heart didn’t quite dare believe it.

Serena was still for a moment, then spoke without looking at me. “Catra. Corva. Go home. I need to speak to Ari alone.”

The tone in her voice demanded no argument. Miranda might be our mother, but Serena had been the one on the island who held us at night. She could tell the twins to sink back into the water, and she could hold my attention with a whisper.

“Mother kept your father on the island for a long time,” she said. “You were almost a year old when Micah decided to leave.”

I quickly did the math in my head. If I had been in my first year, the twins would have been three or four. Serena eight, Vi thirteen, and Titera fifteen. All of them would have been human.

“He wanted to take all of us—you, me, and the twins,” Serena continued. “I think he already knew Titera and Vi wouldn't; they were older and always agreed with Mother about everything. Mother was around more

when they were young, but she hated being tied to the land. She wanted to stay in the water more, and Micah was a softer sort of man than the sailors she was used to. He offered to help and watch us when she was gone, so she kept him alive."

Her eyes flashed upward. "But I think Titera and Vi hated him for that, for encouraging Mother to stay away. So, when he decided to escape, he came to me. He said Mother was wicked, that he only agreed to stay with her so we could all leave together. He asked me if I would help him hold you and the twins on the raft he built."

"You wanted to go with him?" It seemed only natural that she would.

"I . . . liked Micah," it seemed she was admitting a terrible fault, "but I had never left the island before. I was scared. Titera noticed. She wanted to know what Micah said and came after me. I ran to Mother and . . . it just came out. I never had to keep a secret like that before and I was so focused on Mother saving me from Titera . . . I wasn't thinking."

"You were eight." No one thought much of their actions at that age.

She nodded. "And then Mother . . . she . . ."

Serena didn't say it, but she didn't need to. I knew the fate of my father and all of Mother's lovers from the time I could walk. How did the story I thought I knew so well keep getting more terrible each time I heard it?

"They said Micah was evil for trying to take us, and Titera said he should be forgotten completely—his weak baby sacrificed like a male child. But I liked Micah. I held you and cried for weeks after he died. It was all my fault . . . if I had been braver. . . And when I met Aides, I wouldn't have helped or spoken to him at all, but he seemed just like your father. Sweet. We were children, but I thought I loved him. Then he was with Titera."

"She spelled him?" It seemed so obvious to me. Why else would any man want to be with Titera over Serena? Anger grew in my belly like a flame.

"I don't know! Mother said he never loved me, that all men acted that way. And watching him with her . . . saying those things . . ."

"She made you watch?" The angry flame flared into a bonfire.

Serena covered herself with her hands as if warding off a blow. "I just wanted it to stop. They gave me the knife. They said it would be easy, and we would be a family again. I cried and cried. I just wanted it to stop." Her eyes flashed upward, begging me for a forgiveness that I had no right to give or deny. "Mother swore it would never happen again, and that it was

her own fault for keeping Micah on the island for so long. That he corrupted us. So, when the twins were old enough . . .”

“She did not want them to follow after you.”

“They never knew a man before they killed one.”

Just as I had expected. The choice many of my sisters made wasn't a choice at all.

“Titera and Vi still raged over Micah at times, but Mother swore the threat was over and should be forgotten. We all made the change, and you were too young for Micah to have any influence. She said one day, you would prove you belonged with us on your own.”

“I'm sorry.” I wasn't sorry that I hadn't killed Erys; I wasn't sorry that I kept my human body and soul, but I was sorry for the separation between myself and Serena. I wanted to embrace her as a sister and cry over Micah and Aides together, not to have her look at me as the worst kind of traitor.

I didn't want to hurt or punish her. I wanted my family whole and uncorrupted.

“Ari?”

I turned at the painfully familiar voice. What was Erys doing here?

At least he was smart enough to put beeswax in his ears. He and his spear were still yards away. I waved for him to stay where he was, but my sister's eyes grew dark and suspicious.

“You conspired with him,” she said. “You did kill Vi.”

“I want to help you,” I said. But they would never see it that way. I had to lie to her again, and I cursed Erys for forcing me to do so. “He came because I asked him to. I couldn't kill him in front of the others, but I will kill him and bring his heart to Mother.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“I knew you wouldn't. If I brought the heart alone, you would never be able to trust that I killed Erys. You might still think I killed someone else or dug a heart from a grave. But this way, you will know. I want to join you and I will prove it—to you and to Mother.”

“You can't lie about this, Ari. If you don't bring him, Mother won't let you come near our island.”

“I'm not lying. Trust me, please.” She had no reason to, but I needed her to anyway. Desperately.

“I *don't* trust you, and I cannot help you.” Her profile was hard, her chin in the air. “But perhaps I don't have to stop you. You can face Mother

alone.”

I tried for a smile anyway. “Thank you, Serena. And while I talk to Mother . . . Can you get the twins somewhere safe? Somewhere shallow or out of the water? You couldn't before with Micah, can you do that for me now?”

She ducked into the water without giving me an answer. I watched her swim through the air and water like a dolphin, leaving me nothing but a shallow hope.

Alive or dead, I doubted I would ever see my sister again.

CHAPTER 27

Watching the movement and blurred reflections on the water, endless memories of my childhood played before me and took new shapes.

The twins weren't really twins. Their fathers were brothers or cousins or something. One was taken by my mother, and the other shared his fate when he went looking for the first. Both in the same year. How she had laughed over the irony and the foolishness of men. How she relished her twin trophies, a nearly matching set.

We were all taught to agree.

Why now did I wish that somewhere there was a third brother or cousin smart enough to stay away? That there was someone to bring comfort to whatever family was left behind?

I hid my book in the sand. Part of me hoped I would live long enough to retrieve it, but that seemed much too unlikely. I just wanted it safe—one dream, one memory I wanted preserved.

After I finished, I scanned the beach until I saw a small fishing boat tied to a dock. I shrugged as fishermen were still on the list of all those I might not murder but despised just the same. Pulling at the knot of the boat's tether, I didn't even look up when some man yelled.

Erys ran to pay him off in a few rushed words that took less time than it took for me to untangle the thick rope and push it into the sea.

"Where are you going?" The prince was behind me, his beeswax and spear in his hand.

I thought I would do nothing but talk once I regained my voice. Now I couldn't voice a word. So many sad stories invaded my mind. So many lost.

I boarded my new boat and pulled the oars from under the seats.

“Ari, talk to me, please.” Erys put down the spear and held onto one side of the boat, forcing me to break my silence.

“What else is there to say? I told you from the beginning: I am Arianna, Princess of the Deep. Daughter of Miranda and daughter of the sea. Siren. Or at least, I was always meant to become so. I came to Solis to take the heart of the Sun Prince, same as my mother.”

“But you didn’t.” He put his hand on his chest as if to feel the beat. Still there.

“Yes. And my mother will never rest until she kills me for it. She tore out hearts of any who scorned her, and she will not leave this alone.” More a collector of rare artifacts than a mother. We were hers, and she would kill me for turning against her.

“Let me come with you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Don’t you realize where I’m going?”

“No. What do you think you will do?”

“To become a siren, my mother sacrificed a man’s heart to the God of the Deep. I’ve seen the urns. I think that if I can destroy them, destroy their sacrifice, the bond will be broken.” Just like how Lilthe reverted to her animal form when the token with my blood was destroyed. The sirens would become human again. I hoped. If they didn’t . . . could I really kill my own family?

I raised the oars. I would think about that later.

I wouldn’t think of that at all.

Erys stood in the shallows holding tighter onto the boat’s bow. His face had the same stubborn lines I had come to know so well. “I want to help.”

“I don’t want you to help!” Didn’t he see? Having him here made things worse. If he couldn’t be mine, I didn’t want him to save me. “I hate you. Why can’t you just leave me be?”

He ducked his head. “Ari . . . Ari, I . . .”

“You don’t have to lie to me. I know the truth. You don’t love me at all. You might think you are being kind by not saying it, but—”

“If it were a lie, if I thought letting you believe that would make this better, I would. But it isn’t so simple. We can’t be what you hoped, but I *do* love you. I want you to be my sister. Can’t that be enough?” He brown eyes pled with me, still warm with the light of summer. “I love you, and I’m not the only one. Father heard me call you sister. Now that he knows you are royal, he has spent hours with the magi, drafting out an official declaration.

They will have you as his ward, like you would have been if you were an orphaned daughter of a senator, general, or any other member of the ruling caste. They think that if they phrase it correctly, it will be seen as the perfect diplomatic solution to honor your link to Princess Miranda without upsetting our current treaty or dishonoring the current rulers of Cypari. You are a princess. You will be a princess, I will be your brother, and Solis will be your home. We will all love and protect you forever."

My brother? Mother never consented to raising a male child. I had three brothers killed in infancy. Two born between Vi and Serena. One between the twins and me—the prince's same year. Another tragedy never given its full weight. I was supposed to have a brother like Erys.

I wanted a brother more than I wanted a prince. I wanted a family to replace the one I had lost, the sisters I had before they changed. I wanted pain and I wanted joy in all its shades—everything the human world had to offer.

I wanted a soul.

But I could have nothing if I didn't face my mother and remove the dark power she summoned. My gaze stayed locked on the horizon like I didn't hear him.

Just as stubborn, Erys grabbed his spear and climbed into the boat. He sat, arms crossed as if daring me to try to remove him. "I'm coming. Helene agreed; she knows I'm here. She told me to go after you—after yelling at me for not being clearer of my intentions from the first. I never meant to hurt either of you. It had always been so clear in my own head that I never thought you would see anything else." He shrugged in the helpless, careless way that made me hate and love him more. "Helene is going to be my wife, but you are our sister and you will never be alone again."

I glared. Erys had always been such a wild, careless boy. Far too clever for the rest of us. He ran too fast and pushed too far and left everyone else floundering in his wake.

And I was again, helpless to resist him.

"You don't have a choice." Erys took the oars from my hands. "I snuck out, but it won't last. We have to go right now or wait for the palace guards to catch up and come along with us."

The guards? I couldn't allow Jonas to be anywhere near my mother. Erys was bad enough.

I tried to shrug, tried to let him think I was indifferent to his presence. I had told Serena he had to come to prove my loyalty and gain entrance to the island and maybe it was true.

Like it or not, I wouldn’t go back to my island without him.

CHAPTER 28

No one stood in my garden.

Wind rustled through the dry plants like empty footsteps. After all my time in Solis, the lonely island seemed haunted, eerie. Leaving the fishing boat, my hand reached for Erys before I held it back.

This was not the time to ask for physical comfort. Not from him.

So much had changed, and yet nothing had. The instant I stepped onto the sand, a tentacle stretched from the water. Charybdis threw our boat into a rock. It shattered. The prince looked after it with his jaw hanging open, but I didn't. I expected it.

Our journey here had been surreally peaceful, but our exit would not be.

I didn't care if I left. Men had come to my garden, and with that change, my course had been set. I had no thought for what would happen after I failed or succeeded.

Nothing seemed to matter but the coming conflict.

"Remember the plan," I signed. The words were just as much for me as for him.

Erys nodded, fidgeting with his spear. I dunked down and let him enter the cavern in front of me as if he were alone.

My mother's voice sang out from her dark shrine. "Who is that? Is that our young prince? What a surprise." She didn't sound surprised. "Is there something you want?"

Erys walked closer, but he didn't answer. It was better if he didn't. Men often went mute in my mother's presence, and we wanted her to think she had all the control for our plan to work.

“We were expecting Arianna, but you will do as well. Come here, darling.” She waved for him to join her, sitting on the blood-stained altar. I could see far too much of her tattoos and caramel skin in the lamplight, her priestess robes draped on her shoulders like a loosely wrapped package.

Erys had beeswax in his ears. I hid myself in the rocks and signaled my mother’s words to him—or at least her meaning. The words themselves would go untranslated.

I still heard them though. Erys’s face softened. His grip on the spear loosened, and he smiled in the dazed way we had rehearsed. Only my horror was real.

He was a man and could only serve as bait—a distraction. But I didn’t want him to get too far ahead of me, so I signed for him to stumble to a stop.

Mother cocked her head. “You’re tired, aren’t you?” she purred.

I nodded my fist. He nodded his head.

Erys let her leave the altar and come to him, standing limply, but I knew how his heart must beat. This could not last. I had to get to the urns.

I crawled deeper into the cavern, from one rock to the next. I tried to hide each footfall with the drip of the underground stream surrounding the altar.

My mother showed no sign that she had seen me, still focused on Erys. She held his arm as if greeting a friend, but then her eyes narrowed. “What’s this?” She ran her hand up his cheek—a caress that ended in a slap when she pulled out the beeswax.

Erys retightened his grip on the spear. I had to hurry. We never expected this to last long. I tried not to look at them and focus on my own climb, but it was a rough job.

All I wanted to do was charge back to him.

Mother clicked her tongue. “Come offering sweetness, but you bring a blade. Such a naughty boy. You planned this out from the start, using my daughter to get close enough to strike us all down.”

He held the spear in front of his face, dropping all facade. He never was any good at keeping his mouth shut. “Not just me. Ari told me about you.”

“You knew before. You read the book the day you landed here.”

I froze. He read the book. My book. My father’s book. Not just the collection of stories, but also the letter on the very first page. Could it be true? Could Erys have done that and never told me?

He stood frozen too. I doubted Erys cared what my mother thought, but he looked for me as he explained. “I wanted to know where I was. I wanted to know . . .”

“And what did you find out?”

“Ari had a father who loved her. He left the book. He wanted her to be happy and to leave the island. There was something dark here, and Ari seemed so scared.”

“Of you. Of men. Not of us.”

“I just wanted to help her. I wanted her to trust me, come with me.”

“You used her to lure us out. You pretended to love her to steal her away, to kill us all.”

I stared, everything slowing around me. Was that really what happened? I wanted to reject my mother’s words and continue with our plan, but in that moment, I just couldn’t.

He knew. He hadn’t brought Jonas just to teach me—Erys had brought him to teach all the men, a better way to fight the sirens with their ears plugged up. A secret, silent language that was good for war. That was why he had brought a harpoon onto his wedding vessel.

Serena kept accusing me of conspiring with the men to kill them. I never thought it could be true. I hadn’t conspired with the men, but they certainly had been conspiring.

They had never trusted me. Part of me knew I couldn’t blame them for that, but it cast a shadow over all our interactions—even the ones I still cherished.

Had everything been a lie from the first?

“I was betrothed,” he said. “I wanted to help Ari, but I didn’t mean—”

“Betrothed?” Mother laughed. “Those words mean nothing from a man. You’ll betray the trust any woman is so foolish to give you.”

He shook his head. “I never wanted to hurt her.”

“Shall I prove it?” She sang.

I had thought Erys’s former performance convincing until I saw the real version. His dazed expression. The fixated, all-consuming hunger I had assumed common to all men before leaving my island.

Now I knew the truth. I had seen Erys as clever, gentle, even fierce, but he never looked that way. No matter what he knew and what he did, he wasn’t the monster here.

Mother did this, but she lectured him anyway. “Such a naughty boy. You never cared for her at all, did you? You planned it all out, just to destroy us. Just like her father pretended to love me to steal all my girls away.”

Erys nodded, now happy to agree with whatever she said so long as the source of his new obsession moved closer. So obviously forced and unnatural, but my mother drank it in. She believed her own lies and needed to have them confirmed.

She put a finger on his cheek. “There now. You don’t care about Ari or your so-called betrothed. You were just waiting for them all to fall at your feet—playing them both.” Her hand ran down past his tunic to stroke the thin curls on his chest.

“Such a naughty boy. You can’t expect me to kill you quickly. We have more games to play, you and I.” She took the spear from his limp fingers, snapped the shaft, and tossed it away.

He didn’t even seem to notice, reaching out his hand—tentative, shy, but enthralled.

She danced, just out of reach. “Come now, you can do better than that. I know what you want, and I might let you have it. After all, this is my fault too. I carved out my prince’s heart without thought; I never claimed his heir or throne. And I never had another lover after Ari’s father. Perhaps I should have—if I had given Ari a younger sister to raise and care for, she never would have strayed.” She sang again, and Erys came in a rush.

He cornered her against the wall, smiling as if he had caught some prize.

“Such a naughty boy. Such a sweet boy.” She struck, her fangs ripping across his flesh. Blood dribbled across his neck and her chin. She ran her tongue over her lips. “So sweet.”

In that moment, I was entranced as well. I had seen this scene so many times. My mother’s tender, pitying words. A man bleeding, falling for her spell. Smiling, but dying as any other man. So familiar its end seemed a forgone conclusion.

I had a role as well. I believed every lie my mother spun. I stood by and watched, never brave enough to stand against her. Blinding myself to the true horror of what I was seeing.

I couldn’t do that anymore. I forced my hand toward the knife in my belt, ready to destroy the urns.

“Hello, Ari.” The sickly-sweet voice sounded behind me. “Are you not enjoying the show?” Titera struck. She pounced and spun me around, holding me tight.

Erys and I had built a plan, and it seemed they had too. Mother had wanted me to hear her claim against the prince and sent Titera as insurance. I waited too long, and now I was caught in Titera’s grasp, forced to watch my mother and my prince again.

Erys gave a soft whimper, stumbling back a step. He held the wound on his neck, looking up at my mother with hurt in his eyes. Confusion. Like he really thought her to be a lover who should be kind to him. The kind of lover he would have selected for himself.

“Sh . . .” She purred, her words a song. Her sleeve fell off one shoulder. “Where is my strong prince? It’s only a scratch. Let me see you be a man.”

Feral hunger overtook him again. He kissed her in a savage, aggressive way. Blood flowed, his neck unguarded. Forgotten as the spear had been. She ripped open a fresh channel of blood before the first dried up, humming and laughing as she went. He groaned, but never stopped fighting and struggling to please her even as his knees wobbled, and his strength faded.

I didn’t want to see this. I could close my eyes, but I couldn’t block out the sound, the images in my mind. My knees went weak.

“Please . . . Please stop.” If Titera let me reach my knife, I might kill him as Serena killed Aides, just so his death would be cleaner. Kinder.

Or maybe I would stab her instead.

Titera shook her head. “Mother seemed so certain you would see reason once you heard the truth from your prince, but you should never have been allowed to live so long and destroy our family. I will tell her you were stubborn to the end. You will see him die, then you can join him. But perhaps Mother will also give us a twice-royal sister to take your place.”

No way I could watch that happen. I struggled and kicked Titera, escaping her arms.

She cried out. I wielded my knife.

Mother looked up at us and clicked her tongue, asking for my silent compliance. “Girls, there is no need for you to fight. Ari, I know going to the human city confused you, but you should still be smart enough to see that this is for the best.” She pushed Erys from her, and he fell. No sound, no attempt to catch himself.

I looked for his breath and felt only slightly comforted with its shaky rise and fall.

Mother cleaned his blood from her mouth and pointed to my knife. “You should be the one to finish him. You loved him, and he scorned you. He rejected you.”

He loved me in a way she could never understand.

“You can still take his heart and we can put all this behind us,” Mother said.

I couldn’t even pretend I would, not anymore. “He is my brother. You will not touch him again, and he is coming home with me.”

She glared, and thunder cracked from outside. Her power. “How can you believe this boy more than your own mother? The humans, the world of men will never accept you. You are my daughter and you will always be a Princess of the Deep.”

I didn’t answer. I swung my arm to throw the knife at the urns.

If I could just hit *one* . . .

Titera knocked into me and grabbed my arms again. The blade hit the ground near Erys’s fallen form. “Mother, you see how she is?” Titera said, asking permission to strike.

I felt myself go limp in her arms. I couldn’t reason with my mother. I couldn’t fight past Titera to get to the urns. My blade proved useless time and again and I didn’t have any other weapon except for my voice.

My voice. I had my voice, but now I needed something more that couldn’t be spoken, something that had only started to respond to me while my proper voice had been gone—a weak uncertain voice that had only gotten in the way. With that stripped away, a new force had risen to take its place. The force that had exposed Vi and killed Lilthe.

Now I could call it with or without my voice. Mother’s power and mine.

It had called thunder and lightning with my growing fear and uncertainty, but now I fed it an emotion even stronger than that. A new conviction.

I might have lost the heart of a prince. I lost everything, but I would not lose my soul.

I would be Little Sister Anne if I had to, but I would never be the Princess of the Deep.

I sang out my own song. Hard and raw.

A sudden shriek.

The water in the underground stream shifted. The thunder roared. Wind blew in a barely controlled gale. The urns shattered. Their inner ash fell over the rocks and drifted in the air suspended like powered snow.

CHAPTER 29

Somehow, I expected if I could shatter the urns, everything would change, and it had. My mother, a crone past her nineties, stumbled into the underground stream and hit the rocks with a sickening crack, but my sister was now a homely thirty-year-old woman, a human who still wanted me dead.

She gave a yell, and I felt the wind from her arm.

Blood blossomed from her back. Then she dropped.

An empty numbness entered my chest as I looked down. Her breath hitched. The light faded from her eyes. Just standing there, I couldn't pull my eyes away and only saw the shadow of the man still standing behind her with his arm raised. "Ari?"

"You-you killed her."

Erys dropped the knife—glowing to mark the royal blood it had finally spilt. The blood of a siren. His eyes still looked dizzy and lost, his legs barely holding him upright. "I'm sorry."

Sorry? He was alive. My prince, my brother was alive.

But what did this mean for the rest of my family? For Serena and the twins? They wouldn't be sirens anymore. Like Titera before Erys stabbed her, their bodies would be young enough to give them a life. If they were near enough to land. If they could adjust to the change.

If . . .

Tears speckled my hands and the rocks by my feet.

Erys's arms came around me. Almost falling on me, the boy was trying to comfort me just the same. "I'm sorry, Ari. I'm so, so sorry."

I didn’t want him to apologize, but I couldn’t get my tears to stop long enough to tell him so. My remaining sisters were better off. They would make it to land. The four of us would be off the island and have the life my father wanted. I had to believe that.

I wasn’t sorry, and I didn’t want him to be, but I still needed to cry.

Salt and a metallic smell came with Erys’s embrace. I pulled away and touched the place on his neck where he bled.

He winced but tried for a smile. “You know I was just fooling her. I had a plan. The whole time.”

Like Hades’s fire he did. “It doesn’t matter. I won’t tell Helene.” He had to get home and marry her so the war would end. And I had to get off the island.

Our boat was broken, but I ran for a stray board.

“Do you want to build a raft with me?”

CHAPTER 30

Erys and Helene had their wedding in secret, but when it was over, trumpets announced the occasion to every corner of the empire. I sat on the kitchen counter at the nunnery next to the window and heard every sound.

I couldn't hide from them.

My book was open in my lap, but I wasn't reading it. I wasn't much help in the kitchen, either. Since coming to the nunnery, it seemed I did nothing but talk. I couldn't seem to get enough of it. I told Sister Leah everything, even of my gift over the storms that had shattered the urns and helped me so many other times without my notice.

Leah didn't curse me once. "It seems to me that your mother never mastered her gift," she said. Her habit was splatted with dough as she shaped the bread on the table. "It mastered her."

I shook my head. "But you hate men too. That is why you chose to live here." She might be more of a kindred spirit than I thought.

"I chose to live here because I loved a man too much. My Aaron died of a fever before we were to wed. After that, nothing could satisfy me but my god."

I looked back at my book. I read it all, but I still had so many questions. So many inner voices tugged at my heat that I didn't even think a god would satisfy me.

"I thought I loved Prince Erymanthus, but he hurt me just the same. Sometimes, I think I hate him. Things were . . . simpler before him." I pushed my book away. "Perhaps I will never marry or use my voice again. Then I could be Sister Anne and live here again, couldn't I?" I wouldn't

have a thing to do with men or my power over the wind. “It would keep me pure.”

“You would be just as pure if you committed yourself to a good man or found another way to bless others with your song. You may have whatever feelings you wish and make the wind blow through the trees, but you will still be pure so long as you only act to help and serve others.”

“But when my mother tried to use her gift for the elements, everyone said it was a sin.” The mark of a bloody old god, even before Mother used it to kill her prince.

“If your mother had this power before swearing to Valadern, then the power didn’t come from him, and neither does yours.”

“Then where did it come from?”

“I don’t know.” With those words, humbly admitting her limitations, Leah seemed far wiser than any other woman I had met. “And I can’t say everyone will like it. There was so much corruption in the old magic and powers that many can’t see it without linking it with evil. They say the monks felt the same about their sexuality, that it was better to abstain than risk even the appearance of corruption. But it is a beautiful gift for some, used at the proper place and time. Take the vows if that is what you decide your heart is leading you to, not simply to run from something else.”

Where was my heart leading me? It had taken me away from the sea, but what came after that? Probably not a church. I still wasn’t a saint or storybook hero. Leah might be willing to brush over my heritage now, but she might not feel the same if she heard me sing and knew how close I truly had been to fulfilling my mother’s dark oath.

I rejected her once, but maybe part of me would always be a Princess of the Deep.

The priest’s boarhound brayed out in the church’s graveyard. I turned and looked through the open window. I recognized the muscled frame of the young guard at once, but the priest yelled and kept on yelling when the newcomer didn’t say anything to defend his intrusion.

I couldn’t let that stand.

Just because Jonas couldn’t speak, didn’t mean he was stupid.

“What happened?” I signed and said the words, watching for his answer. “Jonas says you should train that damn dog better. He never went near your bloody graves until Cerberus started chasing him, but he’ll talk to me out in the yard if you would prefer.”

Jonas’s smile stretched across his face, and he shook his fist, rejecting my words.

“Fine. Jonas didn’t swear. That was just me.” I slid off the counter and out through the window, leaving the priest to wrestle with his dog. I brushed and straightened the skirt of my stola before speaking to Jonas. “What did you need?”

“Prince wants you to come home.”

Leah stuck her head out the window after me, frowning at the movement of his hands. “You understand that?”

“Of course.” It seemed more people should. “He says Erys wants me to come to the palace.”

Leah laughed. “I don’t know who he thinks he is fooling. No groom would think to send for you on a day like this.” She moved back into the kitchen with a smile that said she already knew how our conversation would end.

Erys would send for me, even on his wedding day, but I did not miss her meaning. She thought Jonas had come on his own. She thought he liked me.

I looked again at his broad shoulders and soft smile.

“Look what I found for you,” Erys had said, the morning after telling me what kind of man he wished I would have. Someone kind, steady, and strong. Someone who never yelled. Something out of my storybook. He spent all night looking for someone who spoke with his hands and quizzed Jonas’s family to make sure he would fit every other qualification. Paid them more money than they saw in a year, asking for only three things in return. “Teach sister. Guard sister. Be nice.”

Erys really had everything planned from the start. My pushy, meddling, unbelievably sweet brother had been playing matchmaker, and I had been too distracted to notice.

“Erys sent you?” I asked, hands on my hips.

“Prince said to get you because . . . I did not like being left behind last night. Prince was hurt and you were gone, and no one knew why. I asked Prince what happened, and he said you came here. He said he already told you to come back, and you said no, but I should try anyway because he not like me pacing. He is nervous about wedding, and ‘I not helping’.”

“And why do you want me to come back? Do you simply wish to hear how I lost my voice? How I regained it?” He must already know something since he hadn’t seem surprised to have heard me speaking to the priest and

Sister Leah, but I still wanted to tell him. “I am the daughter of a princess, but I made a foolish bargain with a witch and siren of the sea. She took my voice, but I have taken it back from her and made it my own.”

He nodded. “Your voice is beautiful. I knew you must be a singer.”

“And do you also wish for me to be your sister?” I had to ask him now, while I could accept either answer.

He rolled his eyes. “I have too many sisters. You are not my sister.”

My voice had left me again, but with Jonas, spoken words didn’t matter. I signed the words I needed. Secret words, meant only for the two of us to share. “Then what am I?”

“You are strong. You are brave. You are . . . princess.” He was so close and earnest it seemed I read the answer from his eyes instead of his hands. Everything from him had always been so certain and clear. “You will be whatever you wish to be.” He kissed my hand.

My heart fluttered, a sudden longing to explore this possibility no matter how it had originated or ended. I took his hand and felt the warmth and power in his palm. A storm still ragged in my heart, but he was a rock, an anchor that could silence everything with a look.

I could have really kissed him, like I had wanted to kiss Erys, and I knew Jonas would have let me. Part of me desperately wanted to, but for now, just holding his hand was enough.

I couldn’t swear myself to another man right now. I couldn’t swear myself to a god.

Torn between two fierce powers, I couldn’t just run from one to another. I wanted to find my own voice first, discover the depths of my own soul, before merging it with someone else’s.

I wanted to sing out my gifts and have the wind answer. A song of hope. A song of love and a summer rain. Singing for those that couldn’t. If I kept searching and exploring, one day I might find a proper place and match for myself. Until then, I wanted to get back to the palace.

My prince, my brother, my new family was waiting.

And Jonas was cute.

TO BE CONTINUED

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Little Mermaid-Have you ever read the original Hans Christian Anderson story of *The Little Mermaid*? Do you hate it? I would certainly understand it if you do! It's a very different story than the popular Disney version. The prince marries another princess. The mermaid dies. Tongues are cut out. Tongues! It's gritty and dark and strange. But it's still one of my absolute favorites.

You see, in the original version, the reason the mermaid falls in love with the prince and longs to become human is because humans have something she and all the other mermaids do not have: The humans have an eternal soul that carries on after death.

Mermaids are doomed to become sea foam.

So, the virtuous but naive mermaid, saves the prince from drowning, and then goes to the Sea Witch willing to trade anything to become human. The Sea Witch proposes an impossible bargain: Along with feeling pain as she walks, the mermaid has her tongue cut out—losing her beautiful voice. Then she must get the prince to fall in love and marry her.

If he does, she will remain human and share a part of his soul.

If he doesn't, she will immediately die—becoming sea foam.

Naturally, the prince doesn't know any of this. He is searching for the woman who saved him and vows to marry her, but all he remembers is her beautiful voice. He is kind to the mermaid, welcoming her to the palace as a sister, but is eventually drawn to marry another singing princess.

The mermaid knows she is going to die, but her sister mermaids trade their hair to the Sea Witch to give her another chance. If she kills the prince, she will become a mermaid again and not die. But when the little mermaid

goes in and sees the prince asleep, lying next to his new bride, the mermaid realizes she still loves him and cannot kill him.

She drops the knife and accepts her death.

This is the beautiful part. Because of her virtuous actions, the mermaid doesn't become sea foam. She dies, but also gains an eternal soul, something she longed for at the beginning.

The Little Mermaid isn't a romance. It's a story of a young woman's struggle to truly understand pain, joy, and selfless love. She gains a human soul. Romances are lovely, but when writing this story, I wanted it to still have some of the depth and dark beauty of the original story.

Christianity- Christianity often gets a bad rap in historical fantasy books, if it is mentioned at all. But many of the morals we take for granted in western society spring from Christian roots. Before that, most of the world followed pagan values that looked a little more like *Game of Thrones.* As a Christian myself, I was hungry to show another side of things and how these values might have clashed and evolved in a city similar to Ancient Rome.

Add that to the well-known mythology of sirens in that time and the soul imagery in the original Little Mermaid and this story started to write itself.

Ancient Rome- As a fantasy author who writes character-driven stories, I don't worry too much about being historically accurate in the language or settings that I use. However, I did do some research on Ancient Rome to give Solis some of the flavor I was looking for.

Big shout out to Philip Matyszak for his book *24 Hours in Ancient Rome*. It is extremely reader friendly and very helpful in that respect.

Sign Language- There was sign language in Ancient Rome! Unfortunately, none of it was written down or standardized in a way that I could possibly duplicate here. So I made the artistic choice to use American Sign Language when describing the signs used by Ari and Jonas. I figured that, if I was going to have everyone speak mostly modern English, I might as well have them use more modern sign language too.

Plus, sign language is a beautiful language that I really wanted to include in one of my books.

You- Thank you so much for reading DEPTHS: A Tale of the Little Mermaid. If you enjoyed the story, please consider leaving a review on

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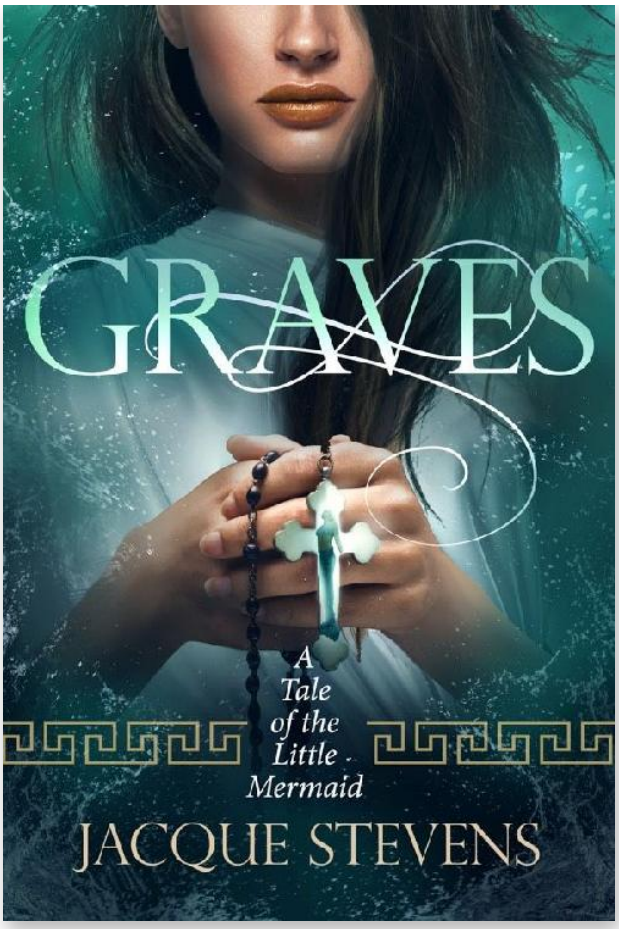
Those that sign up for my newsletter will receive a free short story and other extras.

And just keep reading for the full blurb and cover reveal of Graves!



Behind all my training and searching, I knew this day would come. That I would rescue my sisters from the graves and devils of their past, and we would be a family again.

Human again.

When Arianna destroyed the shrine to her old god, she thought she was free to build a new life in the human world. But controlling her new powers and navigating her relationships isn't as easy as she thought it would be. Her sisters might be the only ones who can truly understand. They are also haunted by their pasts, unable to move on from the graves they left behind as sirens.

To help her sister atone for her past, Ari re-awakens the dark god she pushed aside and travels to the world of the dead.

GRAVES is the direct sequel to Depths, a darker twist on The Little Mermaid that borrows from Greek/Roman mythology and early Christianity.

Available on Amazon

WHAT ARE HIGHTOWER FAIRYTALES?

HighTower Fairytales lean more toward the original sources (NOT Disney) with rich semi-historical settings. They have magic. They have scary monsters. And, most importantly, they have unique and complex characters who are trying hard to improve themselves.

Basically, they are stories meant to inspire, but have a very difficult and occasionally dark tower to climb. They also include plenty of humor and all the heroes marry their prince/princess charming and live happily ever after at the end.

Most are conservatively marked at 14+ and are appropriate for teens and young adults.

Currently these stories include:

WINTER FALLS: A Tale of the Snow Queen (2017)

Katie attempts to save her true love and escape a world of fairytales ruled by the Winter Queen.

On Amazon

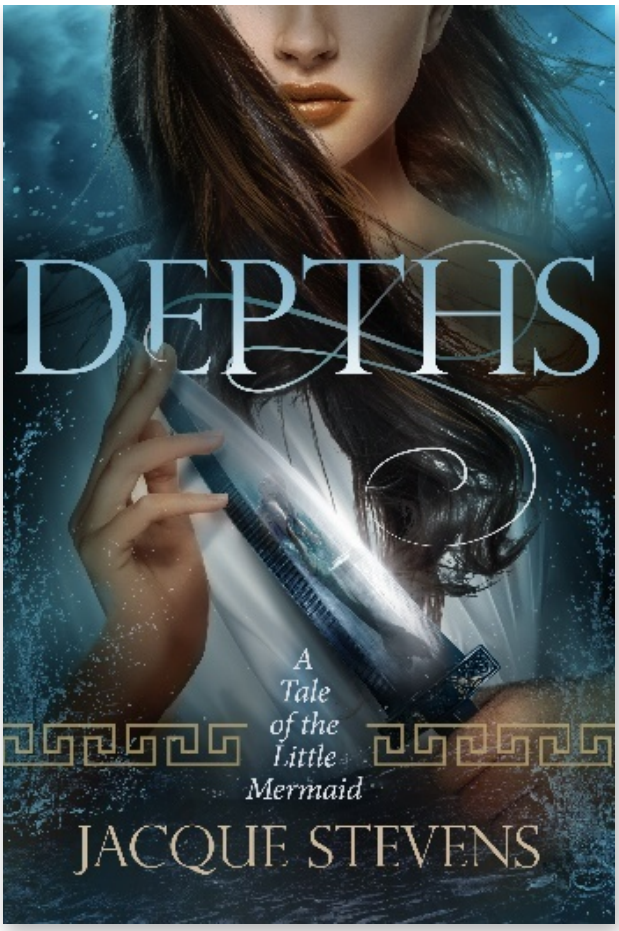
On Goodreads

CRY WOLF: A Tale of Beauty and the Beast (2020)

When her father is killed on a wolf hunt, Isabelle strikes out on her own to face the dreaded beast and finds things are not what they seem.

On Amazon

On Goodreads

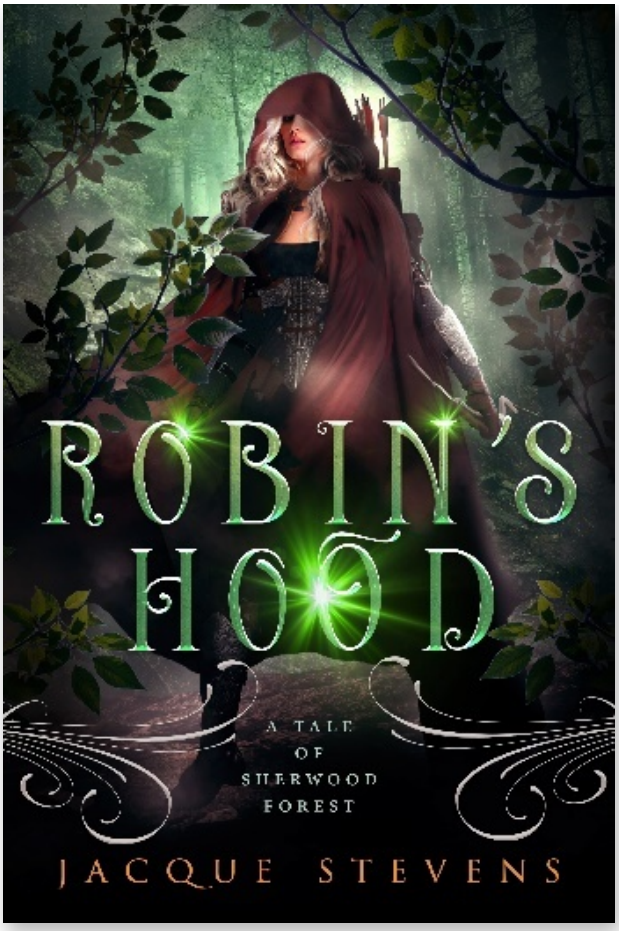


DEPTHS: A Tale of the Little Mermaid (2020)

When her family of deadly sirens order Arianna to sacrifice the heart of a mortal prince, Ari must decide what lies in the depths of her soul.

On Amazon

On Goodreads



ROBIN’S HOOD: A Tale of Sherwood Forest (2021)

When her husband, Robin of Locksley, doesn’t come home from the crusades, Marian puts on his hood to fight against the sheriff and his men.

On Amazon

On Goodreads

And more on the way!! Keep reading for a complete list of all of my published titles.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jacque Stevens wrote her first novel as a stress relief activity during nursing school. Now as a fulltime nurse working in mental and developmental health, she continues to write stories filled with elves, fairies, and all things awesome. She lives in Utah so yes, she does have a huge extended family and occasionally eats green jello, but she does not yet own a minivan.

New friends, enemies, and other visitors from cyberspace can reach Jacque at sjacquebooks@gmail.com and sjacquebooks.com.

ALSO BY JACQUE STEVENS:

WINTER FALLS: A Tale of the Snow Queen (2017)

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FAIRY RING SERIES: When fourteen-year-old Livy's imaginary fairy friends cause a death in the real world, she must unravel the truth behind her so-called schizophrenic delusions before they take another life—hers.

FAIRY RING: Shards of Janderelle

On Amazon

On Goodreads

FAIRY RING: Changeling of Janderelle

On Amazon

On Goodreads

FAIRY RING: Prince of Janderelle

On Amazon

On Goodreads

THE STONE BEARERS (2016): To change her fate, Ashira releases a snarky djinni that could grant her every wish or trigger her destruction.

On Amazon

On Goodreads

THE FROG'S PRINCESS: A Stone Bearers Short Story included in THE FANTASTIC WORLDS Anthology (2016) and given free to newsletter subscribers.

On Amazon

On Goodreads

STONE BEARERS: THE QUEEN'S SERIES

After their mother dies from a mysterious curse, two elves leave the forest to find answers and inadvertently restart an old war between elves and humans.

THE QUEEN'S OPAL: A Stone Bearers Novel (Book One)

On Amazon

On Goodreads

THE QUEEN'S GIFT: A Stone Bearers Novel (Book Two)

On Amazon

On Goodreads

THE QUEEN'S HEIR: A Stone Bearers Novel (Book Three)

On Amazon

On Goodreads

THE QUEEN'S BANE: A Stone Bearers Novel (Book Four)

On Amazon

On Goodreads

THE QUEEN'S RITE: A Stone Bearers Novel (Book Five)

On Amazon

On Goodreads